

**De/Constructing the Iranian Other:  
Captivity, Neo-Orientalism, and Resistance in Three Paradigmatic American  
Memoirs**

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iv
Abstract .....	vi
Chapter One .....	1
Introduction: Inscribing Iran in the West.....	1
Historical Significance and Earliest Figurations .....	3
Fabricating an “Axis of Evil” .....	8
Constructing the Iranian Other in “Theory” .....	21
Iranian Others in Others’ Literature .....	31
Configuration of the Study .....	36
Chapter Two .....	43
<i>Not Without My Daughter</i> : The Mother of Neo-Orientalist Best-sellers.....	43
Reception.....	46
Resurrecting the American Captivity Narrative .....	50
Tales of Caution and the Mixed Marriage Menace .....	59
Ghost Authors.....	71
West Meets East: Clash of Civilization and Un-Civilization.....	72
Writing Iranians Colonially.....	77
Defilement and Contamination .....	78
The Cult of Iranian Domesticity .....	80
Affirmation, Negation, and Bestialization.....	82
Multitudinous Others .....	88
The Linguistic Sovereignty .....	89
The Mad Muslim Man.....	93
Going Native: From American Gentleman to Iranian Brute .....	96
“Veiled Humanity”: The Oriental Accomplice.....	99

Willing Convicts Vs. Western Rebels .....	101
The Villain Writes Back .....	106
Chapter Three .....	111
<i>Reading Lolita in Tehran: Opening Neo-Orientalism's Pandora's Box</i> .....	111
Synopsis .....	112
Reception.....	113
Reader Responses.....	117
Auto-Orientalism .....	120
The Front Cover .....	127
Damsels in Distress: Reading Muslim "Lolitas" in the West .....	131
Behind the Veil: The <i>Topos Obligé</i> of Feminist Orientalism .....	135
Bridging the "Oriental Harem" to the "Free World" .....	151
From Neo-Orientalism to Neo-Conservatism .....	155
From the Western Canon to the West's Cannons .....	162
Curricular and Minority Questions .....	180
The Western Novel .....	182
Ahistorical Historicism and Learned Amnesia .....	186
Chapter Four .....	196
Jasmine and Stars: Strains of Dissent and a Fledgling Alternative Discourse .....	196
<i>Jasmine and Stars: Cracking the Orientalist Monolith</i> .....	204
The Eternal Forough: The Rebellious Bard .....	219
My Uncle the Painter: Reinscribing Iranian Masculinity .....	223
Women Without Men: The Latter-Day Persian Scheherazade .....	229
The Good, the Missing, and the Faceless: Unmasking <i>Lolita</i> in the West .....	234
Tea with My Father and the Saints: Humanizing the Persian Patriarch .....	238
Reading Beyond Jasmine and Stars .....	239

Chapter Five: Conclusion .....	244
Towards an Ambivalent Future .....	244
Works Cited .....	250

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## Abstract

This dissertation critiques literary representations of Iran in three iconic Iranian-American memoirs, both pre- and post-9/11. The texts chosen are Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), and Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (2007). The general theoretical framework of this study is informed by Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, as the dominance of established topoi in these literary representations bespeak the internal consistency of the Orientalist discourse. Through an in-depth critical perusal of the memoir, this study reveals how Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter*, as the quintessential pre-9/11 memoir on Iran, builds on the parameters of a long-established tradition of American captivity narratives to narrate the account of her alleged captivity in post-revolutionary Iran. It also illustrates how Mahmoody's narrative invests in the tropes of colonial discourse often deployed to describe the Other, and how its reception was conditioned by the Hostage Crisis. The critique of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, as the paradigmatic post-9/11 Iranian-American memoir, illustrates how Nafisi's representational modus operandi operate within the framework of a neo-Orientalist paradigm. Nafisi's neo-Orientalist discourse represents Iran through its perceived fanaticism, violence, and philistinism and posits Western literature, and by extension culture, as the liberating medium through which Iranian women can be 'redeemed'. The analysis of Nafisi's memoir further delineates how her glorification of canonical Western literature lends itself to appropriation by a U.S. neoconservative ideology that advocates the liberation of Muslim women through American military intervention. Finally, Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars* is investigated as a counterhegemonic discursive intervention that seeks to subvert the dominant neo-Orientalist representations of Iran and Islam. The study illustrates how through a strategic deployment of Orientalist tropes, as well as by invoking prominent classical and contemporary Persian literary giants, Keshavarz effectively constructs a space within which the voices of the marginalized Other find expression. Furthermore, her memoir manages not only to produce a counter-narrative to that of Nafisi's, but also to challenge many dominant perceptions about Iran, Islam, and the Middle East that have served towards dehumanizing and rendering invisible the Iranian Other.

## Chapter One

### Introduction: Inscribing Iran in the West

In the introduction to her travelogue, *Two Wings of a Nightingale: Persian Soul, Islamic Heart* (2011), the New Zealand author, Jill Worrall, writes on her website, “Iran is probably the most misunderstood country in the world, and its people are among the most feared” (Worrall). This statement alone is a testament to the significance of Iran – as a major locus in the Muslim Orient – in the mainstream Western Orientalist discourse about its Oriental/Muslim Other. It also bespeaks the power of the representational regime through which the country, its people, and particularly its main religion, Islam, have been subject to constant tropes of Othering and demonization in the West.

It is the dominance, authority, and implications of such representations that lend urgency to their methodical analyses and critique. The current dissertation, therefore, aims to critique literary representations of Iran in three iconic texts that were part of the proliferation of literary productions informed by the two defining historical junctures of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran (and within its context the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the Hostage Crisis (1979-1981)) and what is commonly known as 9/11. The corpus of literary texts dealing specifically with Iranian contexts has expanded exceedingly since the Revolution and reached its apex in what Professor Hamid Dabashi has dubbed “the haymarket of post 9/11 anxieties” (*Post-Orientalism* 276). Sanaz Fotouhi has recorded that “while between 1980 and 2001 there had been only sixteen memoirs published by Iranians abroad in English, at least fifty more have been published since then” (until early 2012) (99) excluding the ones published in ‘fictional’ forms or as poetry volumes. This dissertation provides a necessary analysis to this upsurge in publication, undertaking a critical perusal of three paramount memoirs, by hyphenated Iranian-American women, that enjoy an iconic status in their representations of Iran and Islam: Betty Mahmoody’s *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), as the quintessential pre-9/11 example; Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), as the paradigmatic post-9/11 neo-



Orientalist memoir; and Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran* (2007), as the paramount counter-narrative.

The critical analysis of these texts is built predominantly upon Edward Said's theorization of the concept of Orientalism in his seminal 1978 book of the same name, and its latter-day manifestation, which is post-9/11 neo-Orientalism. The following critique of the three iconic texts is meant to reveal that notwithstanding their formal and, to a lesser extent, thematic differences, they represent Iran and Islam within an established Orientalist frame of reference and through similar representational apparatus. Also, even though these texts are products of two different eras, that is pre- and post-9/11, the similarities in the political and historical contexts of their production have equally contributed to their production, promotion, and reception in the United States, and more broadly in the West.

In my reading of the three selected texts, I will demonstrate how the dominant representations of Iran and Islam can be read as manifestations of a sustained and long-standing Orientalist discourse in the West. This continuity is a fact that Edward Said bemoans in his Preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his *Orientalism*; Said criticizes the lack of any evident change in the manner in which American and European representations of the Middle East primarily define contemporary Muslim societies in terms of what they see as "their backwardness, lack of democracy and abrogation of women's rights" (xviii). Said demonstrates how the overall understanding of the Middle East and Islam has deteriorated in the United States since the first publication of his *Orientalism* in 1978:

I wish I could say, however, that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn't ... In the US, the hardening of attitudes, the tightening of the grip of demeaning generalization and triumphalist cliché, the dominance of crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissenters and "others," has found a fitting correlative in the looting, the pillaging, and destruction of Iraq's libraries and museums. (xviii)

Therefore, my analysis of the three texts engages not only with representational tropes of Othering vis-à-vis Iranian people, their culture, religion, and politics, but also with a counter-narrative that seeks to challenge, undermine, or subvert the dominant Orientalist discourse. In the course of this study, I will demonstrate how the dominant Western representations of Iran conditioned by certain historical junctures are informed by an Orientalist frame of reference that renders the Iranian/Muslim 'Others' as inferior, and especially Iranian/Muslim women as oppressed, victimized, and passive. This rendition, in turn, matches the official view of conservative U.S. policies towards Iran, which represent the country not only as its arch enemy but as *the* greatest threat to world stability. It goes without saying that such representations have significant implications in the context of ongoing tensions between Iran and the United States. I will also illustrate, in the final body chapter, how through a discourse of 'resistance', one can construct a space that enables a mode of writing back to the hegemony of the foregoing representations, and lends visibility to the voices that are marginalized, silenced, or absent from the dominant narratives.

Any attempt at investigating certain selective representations of any subject must take account of the historical context that underlies the subject of representation and in which the subject is constantly re-conceptualized and recycled. This is because – in all their normative selectivity – particular conceptualizations of any given locale and its populace are almost always informed by a particular historicity definitive of the image represented. Hence, without such contextualization, neither the subject of representation nor its (mis)representations can be fully appreciated. It is only apt, therefore, to demonstrate briefly first the historical significance of Iran to the West and then the historicity of its representations.

### **Historical Significance and Earliest Figurations**

Even though Worrall's assertion (quoted above) about the endemic misconceptions of Iran clearly encapsulates the current Islamo-Iranophobic zeitgeist in the West, representations of Iran in the Western imaginary extend as far back as classical antiquity. With Iran/Persia occupying one of the most significant geostrategic loci on the world stage throughout history,

the image of the country has always remained central to the Western imaginary. As Lila Azam Zanganeh has observed, “Whether as a haven of exotic sensuality or a stronghold of fanatic religiosity, Iran has, since ancient times, inflamed the popular imagination” (xi). From 550 BC, when it was deemed the world’s preeminent empire during the Achaemenid era, right through to when it fell subject to the colonial whims of Russia, Britain, the Ottoman Empire, the USSR, and the United States, and, later, the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the Pahlavi dynasty ending twenty-five centuries of royal rule, Iran has almost always been of considerable geopolitical significance both to its immediate neighbors and to dominant world powers.

The earliest imaginings of Persia<sup>1</sup> as the realm of luxury, excess, despotism, and arrogance were primarily inspired by the rise, reign, and decline of the Persian Empire – as the world’s largest ancient empire and civilization hitherto, and the rival of its Occidental counterparts. That the Persian Empire became the subject of much obsession, awe, and apprehension in the European collective consciousness is evident in the figurations of Persia in the literary imaginary of the Occident throughout centuries. This reflects the importance of Persia as an immediate neighbor and antagonist of the Greek states in this period, and the lasting centrality of the Greek and Roman classical period on the rest of the West. Perhaps the most ancient representations of Persia appeared in the earliest of Aeschylus’ surviving plays, *The Persians* (472 BC), which, according to Edward Said, is the earliest, and the quintessential, text in which “Europe ... articulates the Orient” (*Orientalism* 57). In this historical tragedy about the Greek defeat of the Persians in the Battle of Salamis, the Persians are made distinct from their Greek counterparts through their indulgence in such “Eastern excesses”<sup>2</sup> (*Orientalism* 57) as extravagance, hubris, sensuality, despotism, and irrationality (Peernajmodin 21).

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<sup>1</sup> The exonym Persia was the official name of Iran used in the Western world until 1935. In March 1935, Reza Shah Pahlavi, the penultimate Shah of Persia, issued a decree asking foreign delegates to use the term “Iran”, (meaning “the land of Aryans”) in formal correspondence. Nowadays both terms are employed in different contexts. While “Persia” and “Persian” are more common in historical cultural contexts, “Iran” is used mostly in political and Islamic ones.

<sup>2</sup> Even though such images of Persia/Iran have been supplanted by the stereotypes of Iranians as backward, fanatic, and violent, they have not vanished completely from view. Porochista Khakpour observes how in the film *Clueless* (1995), “pointing to a cloud of Cartier, Armani and Aqua Net”, the main character, Cher, declares “And

In his pioneering study of literary representations of Persia, Hossein Peernajmodin has demonstrated how the foregoing figurations were also circulated in the canonical and non-canonical works of English Renaissance authors such as Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590), John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671), to name only a few (4). Thanks to the Romantic poets' interest in and appropriation of the matter of the Orient,<sup>3</sup> exemplified in Thomas Moore's Oriental romance, *Lalla Rookh* (1817), as well as the late 18<sup>th</sup>- and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century "Persian poetry fad" in England (Yohannan), images of Persia as a land of exoticism, mystery, indulgence, and unbridled sexuality, appeared more than ever before in the English literary tradition, especially in the works of such Romantic poets as Lord Byron and Robert Southey.

Foundational to the Occidental imagination of Persia is the text popularly known in the West as *One Thousand and One Nights* (or alternatively, *Arabian Nights*). Arguably, no other work has contributed more to the exoticization and eroticization of Persia in the Western imaginary. With the harem – as a site where pleasure and peril are curiously intertwined – lying at the heart of the narrative, *One Thousand and One Nights* represents Persia as a place of unbridled sensuality and cruelty and has significantly shaped the European view of the misogynistic and murderous Persian, best epitomized in the character of the Persian King Shahriar and his treatment of his multitude of doomed wives. Regardless of such figurations of Persia (or the greater Orient), and consistent with an Orientalist view of Oriental philistinism, Said draws attention to how in his *Eothen* (1844), Alexander William Kinglake concludes that "the *Arabian Nights* is too lively and inventive a work to have been created by a 'mere Oriental, who, for creative purposes, is a thing dead and dry— a mental mummy'" (*Orientalism* 193).<sup>4</sup>

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that's the Persian mafia. You can't hang with them unless you have a BMW" (Khakpour "Essay: Iranians Moving Past Negative Depictions in Pop Culture").

<sup>3</sup> John D. Yohannan attributes this interest, among other things, to "the establishment, in England, of a genuine, firsthand study of the languages of Persia, Arabia, Turkey, and India" (Yohannan 137).

<sup>4</sup> Even though such representations of Persia were dominant in the Western discourse, they were at times interrupted by representations that were not as universally negatively stereotypical. We read in Sir John Malcolm's *Sketches of Persia* (1849), for instance, that Persians "are the most cheerful people in the world; and they delight

It was, however, in the ‘Oriental’ travelogues penned by European travelers, missionaries, and delegates mostly during the age of European – and particularly British – colonialism that representations of Persia as uncivilized, backward, primitive, decadent, and unfit-for-self-governance pervaded the mainstream (popular) Western discourse in earnest. Prominent in this category is James Morier’s *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824), a novel written by a British imperial diplomat,<sup>5</sup> which has been considered “the most popular Oriental novel in the English language and a highly influential stereotype of the so-called ‘Persian national character’ in modern times” (Amanat 561). Such colonial accounts as those of Morier’s are characterized by overwhelmingly negative representations of Persia and its peoples. *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, for instance, “lampoons Persians as rascals, cowards, puerile villains, and downright fools, depicting their culture as scandalously dishonest and decadent, and their society as violent” (Amanat 561). The opening passage from another one of Morier’s works, *The Mirza* (1841), a collection of tales about Persia, encapsulates the dominant discourse of the British Empire concerning both its Persian Other and itself. The passage bears quoting at length:

Although the Persians cannot be complimented upon their morality, as a nation, yet no one can deny that they abound in a lively wit, a social disposition, and in qualities which fit them to be agreeable companions. The Englishman, bred up in reverence of truth, in love of justice, and in admiration of every thing that constitutes good government, with a strict sense of honour, and a quick impulse to uphold his rights as an independant man, remains perfectly astonished and incredulous at all he sees and hears, when first he finds himself an inhabitant of an Asiatic state. In Persia particularly, where truth and falsehood are upon equal terms, where a man to live, must practice deceit, where the

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in familiar conversation ... Poets, historians, astrologers, wits, and reciters of stories and fables who have acquired eminence, are not only admitted into the first circles, but honoured” (66-7).

<sup>5</sup> Morier’s other works include his travelogues *A Journey through Iran, Armenia and Asia Minor to Constantinople in the years 1808 and 1809* (1812), and its sequel *A Second Journey through Iran to Constantinople between the years 1810 and 1816* (1818). His other literary works *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan in England* (1828), followed by *Zohrab the Hostage* (1832), *Ayesha the Maid of Kars* (1834), and *The Mirza* (1841) all engage with Persia and its people in one way or another.

meaning of the word honour is not to be defined, and where there is no government but such as emanates from caprice or despotism, there his astonishment and disgust are complete, although, at the same time, should he have any turn for humour, he cannot help being amused at the ingenuity of the wiles exercised, at the light-hearted levity, and apparent clown and pantaloon philosophy with which evils, such as the Englishman would call great, are supported. (1-2)

Such depictions would be best appreciated if read against the backdrop of an expanding British imperialism in its heyday.<sup>6</sup> In the colonial context of their own time, such accounts served as “soft weapons”, to borrow Jillian Whitlock’s phrase (*Soft Weapons* 3), deployed to justify and perpetuate colonial domination that pledged the ‘civilizing’ of the Oriental subject.

As far as representations of Iran in the United States are concerned, it is imperative to contextualize such representations within the historico-political context of the last century. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the U.S. in Iran’s political landscape became more dominant. In 1953 the new administration in the U.S. executed a coup d’état that overthrew Iran’s first democratically elected Prime Minister – Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, who had nationalized Iran’s oil and incurred the wrath of the British – and reinstated the Shah. Following the coup – which was to become the most painful collective memory of Iranians vis-à-vis the United States for decades – the Shah set out to consolidate his power, and in so doing sought the enduring backing of the U.S., to whom he now owed his throne. The U.S. had now a much stronger presence in Iran, partly justified by its fear of Iran’s Communist neighbor, and relations between the two countries on an official level strengthened. The presence was both justified and solidified through such factors as the alliance whereby the United States assisted in the buildup of Iran’s military and the notorious SAVAK (Iran’s intelligence and security organization), the creation of diplomatic immunity – known commonly in Iran as capitulation –

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<sup>6</sup> It bears mentioning that this kind of nationalistic chauvinism is also applied to other countries (including European ones) and also to the British, too. Nevertheless, the British, and other colonial European powers’ accounts become more dominant as other aspects of imperialism support their ascendancy.

granted to all U.S. military personnel stationed in Iran. Such displays of American dominance and sway were among a variety of factors that fueled the anti-American sentiment that played a significant role in setting the ground for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The severely strained relationship between the two countries grew ever more troubled when on 4 November 1979, a group of revolutionary students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took fifty-two American diplomats and citizens hostages for 444 days. This landmark juncture in the relationship between the two countries will be further elaborated in the following sections of the study.

### **Fabricating an “Axis of Evil”**

Much of the significance of Iran’s position to the West over the past century is driven by its rich oil reserves and its geostrategic location for the dominant Western, as well as Eastern, powers.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution – one of the biggest decolonizing movements of the twentieth century<sup>8</sup> – this position in geopolitical equations has undergone considerable mutations. Almost all Western countries, and primarily the United States, who had exerted overwhelming sway over Iran’s political, economic, and cultural landscapes, lost their vested interests and had to grapple with a post-revolutionary Iran defined by ideas of independence and resistance to foreign hegemony. It was against this backdrop that Iran went from being, in the words of Jimmy Carter, the West’s “island of stability” in the Middle East to its chief ‘enemy’. This metamorphosis partly fueled the persistent tropes of Othering and vilification that were soon enormously intensified by the Hostage Crisis, the representation of which in Western media served to further associate Iranians with such phrases as “‘non-rational’, ‘hungry for martyrdom’, and ‘unwilling to compromise’” (Mobasher 49). A 2012 Gallup Poll showed that “Americans most frequently mention Iran when asked to name the country they consider to be the United States’ greatest enemy, and the 32% who do so is up from 25% in

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<sup>7</sup> In this light, one can refer to such significant historical junctures as the British exploitation of Iran’s oil at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as Iran’s geostrategic significance to the dominant world powers during the first and second World Wars.

<sup>8</sup> Even though Iran was never physically colonized, as Richard Cottam has argued, there existed “a bizarre situation in which a form of indirect colonial control existed in the hands of two imperial powers whose relative positions were in constant flux” (9).

2011” (Newport). In this context, Danny Schechter has argued that “Iran is being used again as a symbol of the menacing ‘bad guy’” and observes that

Iran is almost tailor made to play the role of a contrived enemy. The nation is an Islamic Republic; and, has a history of disagreements with the US. It refuses to bow down to American cultural or political demands and insists on playing an independent role in the world at large, according to its own customs and values. (Schechter)

With the advent of the 1979 Revolution and what in the West was perceived as the resurgence of Islam,<sup>9</sup> a whole new phase of writings on Iran – mostly travel writings – began to emerge. These works build upon the ‘Oriental’ travel-writing genre and regurgitate similar topoi and motifs popularized by European emissaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, they focus more on what they purport to be the workings of the Revolution and Islam in post-Revolutionary Iran. Paramount in this genre are the two ‘Islamic’ travelogues of the Trinidad-born British writer, V. S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers* (1981) and *Beyond Belief* (1998) , which recount the author’s excursions in the four Muslim countries of Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia<sup>10</sup> and portray Muslims predominantly as backward, frozen-in-the-past, ignorant, and fanatic.<sup>11</sup> Even so, such travel accounts of Iran by Westerners were both few and far between and almost inconsequential. As such, they hardly claimed any significant position in the English language literary market. Similarly, even though the Islamic Revolution of 1979 initiated the mass migration of many Iranians to the West – particularly to the U.S. – there did not exist a substantial body of literature in English by “first generation” Iranian-American authors either in

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<sup>9</sup> This Western interpretation of the Islamic Revolution overlooked the fact that Islam had always remained an essential part of the Iranian society and national identity, and is a further testament to the prevalent basic ignorance of the West regarding its Muslim Others.

<sup>10</sup> The former travelogue purports to recount the author’s travels to the four mentioned countries to observe the workings of Islam in the fabric of the society. The latter alleges to be an investigation on the theme of “conversion” in the four non-Arab Muslim countries.

<sup>11</sup> Such representations by Naipaul are not limited to Muslim countries and also appear in his writings about Africa, India, and the West Indies, too



the memoir genre or in ‘fictional’ narratives.<sup>12</sup> In fact, in the review printed on the back cover of the first anthology of Iranian-American writings, *A World Between*, Michael Beard observes that the stories of Iranian-Americans “never really became public and Iranians often seemed the most invisible of new Americans”.

The catastrophic events of 9/11 marked a watershed in world history and coupled with the subsequent “War on Terror” rhetoric gave rise to an unprecedented Islamophobic zeitgeist that deemed Islam as the greatest threat to the ‘civilized’ world. In his 2002 State of the Union Address, George W. Bush opened his speech by warning that “the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers” (Bush “State of the Union Address”). Even though Iran was not, by any stretch of the imagination, implicated in 9/11, the branding of Iran by the American president as part of “an axis of evil” (Bush “State of the Union Address”) attached an Iranophobic element to the rampant post-9/11 Islamophobia. This Iranophobia also owes much to a prevalent public mindset that does not distinguish between Iran and its Arab neighbors and rather treats the whole gamut of countries in the Middle East as monolithically “Islamic”. With the ‘threat’ of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ looming large in the West, ‘knowing’ the Muslim Other became a *sine qua non*. In the words of Fatemeh Keshavarz, “Since 9/11, knowing about the Muslim Middle East is not a luxury, it is a matter of life and death” (*Jasmine and Stars* 2).

Central to the United States’ definition of itself as a civilized nation has been the role of (white) women, (as exemplified by the early Suffragists) (Elkholy). Traditionally within U.S. civilizational discourse, the exploitation and oppression of women has been projected as a characteristic of ‘uncivilized’/‘savage’ cultures, perhaps best observed in the tradition of American captivity narratives and the natives’ treatment of women. It is, therefore, no surprise that since the 1979 Islamic Revolution the status of women has been part of a U.S. neo-conservative agenda (Ernst 13) as a means of measuring other nations’ ‘civilized’ status. As Carl W. Ernest points out, “neo-conservative attacks on Islam generally include a gender egalitarian

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<sup>12</sup> Notable in this category are the works of Nahid Rachlin, one of the pioneers of Iranian-American literature. Most of Rachlin’s works, such as *Foreigner* (1978), *Married to a Stranger* (1983), *The Heart’s Desire* (1995), were published prior to 9/11.

and women's rights perspective" (13). It is in this context that the veil and other 'Islamic' laws regarding women assumed a highly publicized place in the anti-Islamic rhetoric in the West. In the same vein, essential to the post-9/11 Islamophobic discourse and the justification of American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was the rhetoric of 'liberating' Muslim women, or to borrow Spivak's *locus classicus*, the idea of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (93). The 'oppression' of women in Afghanistan, for instance, played a decisive role in the pre-invasion rhetoric after 9/11. In the same historic 2002 State of the Union Address – that more than anything else encapsulates the Bush administration's American exceptionalist and Western supremacist mindset – the American president declared triumphantly that "The last time we met in this chamber, the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free and are part of Afghanistan's new government" (Bush "State of the Union Address"). In other words, while the U.S. was persistently obsessed with the 'threat' of the Muslim world, the post-9/11 outlook placed the question of Muslim women at the center stage. Concurrent with the U.S. waging its "War on Terror" first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, "the liberation of women from barbaric regimes became a powerful rationale for intervention" (Ho 432).<sup>13</sup>

In the same manner that white middle-class Western women were recruited to join the 'civilizing mission' of European colonial powers, Middle Eastern/Muslim women have produced a corpus of literary works focusing on what they purport to be the oppression of Muslim women. Even though the preponderance of these authors identify as 'feminists' and women's rights activists, Bahramitash has dubbed this coterie of authors "Orientalist feminists" ("Orientalist Feminism" 108). As the critique of the first two works would reveal, the feminist ethos through which the Iranian/Muslim women have been presented is founded on the presumption that the experience of white, middle-class, and relatively well-educated Western women can be universally representative of all notions of womanhood. Even though this idea has been vigorously contested by a whole array of women-of-color feminists (such as Spivak,

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<sup>13</sup> The irony, indeed, is that in Iraq, especially, military intervention has actually set back such goals (Al-Ali and Pratt).

Mohanty, Hooks, and Elkholy), Orientalist feminism still functions on this false premise. Nevertheless, as the fourth chapter in this study would illustrate, this Orientalist feminism is far from uncontested and is often challenged by other Middle Eastern/Muslim feminists questioning the ethos of a brand of feminism which they deem as short-sightedly white, Western, and universalist.

The post-9/11 Islamophobia and the question of Muslim women are definitive to the production and Western reception of 'Muslim' and Middle Eastern memoirs by female authors, since almost all such accounts are highly critical of their native countries and the status of Muslim women. It is largely due to this particular historical juncture that what is often deemed a 'phenomenon' in the American literary landscape transpired. The post-9/11 English literary market is characterized by the burgeoning of Iranian-American memoirs unprecedented for any other 'minority' group in North America. Fotouhi has recorded that just between 2003 to 2011 Iranian women have published more than 40 books with reputable publishers, most offering a belated "yet timely account of the Islamic revolution and its traumatic consequences in hindsight of conflicts between Iran and America" (127). In fact, Fotouhi's exhaustive list of Iranian-American writings includes about 140 works of memoir and 'fiction' produced, predominantly by Iranian women, after 9/11 to early 2012 (229-37).

It is worth mentioning that the consideration of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) and Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars* (2007) as "post-9/11" memoirs transcends their analysis as merely products of a specific juncture in U.S. history. In other words, the two paradigmatic texts were not merely produced after 9/11, but display thematic and contextual denominators that distinguish them as literary products of the Iranian diaspora in that particular period in U.S. history. These texts, discussed respectively in chapters Three and Four, are part of the sudden proliferation of Iranian-American memoirs and belong to the group of academic and journalistic memoirs. They also share the overarching topoi (most importantly the question of Iranian womanhood), the dominant literary genre, and the target Western audience, especially women, they each attempt to address and educate. They also display similar textual strategies of authorization through their investment in the power of personal

narratives, eye-witness accounts. Both texts also evince strong association with the West (especially through education), and privilege as omniscient and 'expert' authority crafted through academic affiliations. The question of authorial authenticity and authority plays a paramount role in the reception and promotion of these memoirs. In the context of post-9/11 fear and curiosity about the Muslim Other, and widespread public ignorance regarding them, these memoirs are taken as 'true' accounts in which the authors cast themselves as latter-day Scheherazades who through storytelling both recount the 'threat' and 'depravity' of the Muslim world and manage to 'save' themselves (and by extension other 'victims'). Thus, beyond being conditioned by a temporal specificity, the two texts in question are informed by denominators that were driven by a post-9/11 atmosphere that brought the question of Muslim women to the fore of public and political discussions and in the aftermath of which 'experts' and 'natives' with 'first-hand' knowledge of the Muslim 'Other' were in high demand.

The Iranian-American literary landscape, especially after 9/11, is one characterized by the predominance of women and, with very few exceptions, the absence of men.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, owing largely to the controversial 2009 presidential election that brought Iran back to the headlines, a few memoirs by Iranian men have emerged and have been rather well-received in the United States since 2010. *Letters to My Torturer* (2010) by Houshang Asadi (translated into English by Nushin Arabzadeh), *A Time to Betray: The Astonishing Double Life of a CIA Agent Inside the Revolutionary Guards of Iran* (2010) by Reza Kahlili, and *The Gaze of the Gazelle: The Story of a Generation* (2011) by Arash Hejazi are the most significant titles in this latest trend. It should be noted, however, that even though all three texts are in English, none of them fall within the "Iranian-American" literary category, and hence, are not included in the works critiqued in this study.

The predominance of women in the Iranian-American literary scene after 9/11 can be traced to several factors. Persis M. Karim, who has anthologized three collections of Iranian-

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<sup>14</sup> One such exception is Afshin Molavi who has published two texts after 9/11: *Persian Pilgrimages: Journeys Across Iran* (2002) and *The Soul of Iran* (2005).

American writings<sup>15</sup> maintains that fulfilling parental expectations and “the exigencies of immigrant life” have left little space for Iranian men in America to pursue literary and poetic aspirations (xx). Also, the rise in the number of Iranian-American women writers is seen as an “outgrowth of Iranian women’s specific experiences” both with regards to the conditions of migration which requires reshaping their identities to befit their new context, as well as the need “to respond to the view of Iranian women purveyed by both the Islamic Republic and the Western media” (Karim xx).

More importantly, however, is the high demand in the U.S. market for ‘exotic’ tales from Muslim countries, driven by what Jasmin Darznik has described as “an insatiable curiosity for both the intimate details of [Muslim women’s] lives and descriptions of forbidden and alien landscape” (“The Perils” 56) – and the alleged urgency of getting to know the ‘threat’ of Islam in the post-9/11 milieu. In this context, the question of Muslim women has been brought to the fore by Western feminists who employ “the language of human rights in their struggles to compel states and international organizations to address questions of gender inequality and women’s rights” (Fernandes 33). The campaign against what is perceived as oppression in the Muslim world, as some prominent postcolonial/Third World feminists have argued, when the contextual and historical situatedness and specificity of Muslim women’s experiences and struggles are overlooked, only results in divesting them of their social and political agency (Mohanty 71).

Equally significant in discussions of Iranian-American literary productions is the predominance of the memoir as the genre in which works of Iranian-American authors have most often appeared. What makes the consideration of such texts more appealing is the fact that, as several critics have demonstrated, autobiographical writing by women, as we know it today, has never flourished in earnest in the Iranian literary tradition (Milani “Iranian Women” 130; Najmabadi et al.; Whitlock *Soft Weapons* 164). This absence has been mostly attributed to

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<sup>15</sup> These collections are *A World Between: Poems Short Stories and Essays by Iranian Americans* (1999), *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2006) , and *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers* (2013) .

a cultural context that, according to Farzaneh Milani, “values and strongly institutionalizes a sharp separation between the inner and the outer, the private and the public” and where self-revelation is not normally encouraged (“Iranian Women” 130). This self-censorship, as Milani argues, bespeaks a discursive and social internalization of the strict censorship imposed on Iranian social, political, and literary landscapes for centuries, and which manifests itself in, among many other things, the absence of an established autobiographical tradition in contemporary Iran. Concomitant with the notion of self-censorship was the high rate of illiteracy among Iranian women prior to the 1979 Revolution, which further impeded any literary self-representation. Nevertheless, this does not mean a total absence of autobiographical writing in Iran; rather, most of such ‘autobiographies’ were penned by prominent male figures who recounted important historical or political junctures and offered little or no information about their private lives.<sup>16</sup>

Some critics have attributed the Iranian-American preference for memoir partly to the fact that, unlike autobiography, memoir writing is mostly a female domain (Fuchs; Larson 12; Naghibi 80; Simons).<sup>17</sup> Naghibi has argued that while the genre of autobiography operated “within an evolutionary model of personal development and was generally understood as a superior form of self-reflexive exercise”, memoirs were “perceived to make fewer intellectual demands of the reflecting subject” (79-80).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, given that the Iranian-American memoirs are centered upon specific historical junctures in Iran or exilic female experiences (or on occasions a combination of both), the female authors have chosen to articulate their narratives within the frameworks of a genre that is perceived to be less male-dominated.

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<sup>16</sup> The first Iranian female autobiography, however, is often credited to the Princess Tāj-al-Saltāna (1884-1936), daughter of the Qajar king Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah. *Khāterāt* (meaning, the memoirs) was written in 1914 and was first partially published in 1969 in Persian and translated into English in 1994.

<sup>17</sup> There are other critics who maintain that the separation of these terms is elastic, with only recently a distinction on narrower scope of focus being something that sets a memoir apart from a sometimes longer life representation in autobiography. Nima Naghibi, for instance, has used the terms interchangeably and has argued that “the contemporary abundance of nonfictional self-reflexive narratives tend to challenge the traditional generic and gendered distinctions between the two categories” (80).

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Lejeune has also argued that the memoir does not share the “subject treated” element of the autobiography, which he defines as “individual life, story of a personality” (4)

One of the most significant theorizations of the memoir genre revolves around its “therapeutic and revelatory” nature (Olson). Suzette A. Henke has designated this mode of writing as “scripto-therapy”, defined as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experiences in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (xii). This feature, therefore, partly explains the proliferation of Iranian-American memoirs as part of a bigger trend invigorated by an unprecedented number of novice memoirists in the United States. As the majority of Iranian-American memoirists (or their parents) migrated to the U.S. in the aftermath of the Revolution, their accounts are replete with expressions of nostalgic memories, trauma, the desire to return to a ‘lost’ homeland, and the vicissitudes of exilic life. In this light, the memoir constructs a discursive site proffering the potentials for self-expression, within which the exilic subjects can both maintain and reconstruct their identities. It is through the very process of writing about a traumatic past, the pangs of exile, and often a challenging and ambivalent exilic presence, that the diasporic subject can negotiate their agency and subjectivity. As Henke has written,

Autobiography has always offered the tantalizing possibility of reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically inflected by language, history, and social imbrication. As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture. (xv)

Since most Iranian-American authors invest heavily in articulations of the Revolution as a traumatic encounter and a crucial juncture in the formation of their identities, they have opted for writing memoirs as a process of therapeutic engagement conducive to the recovery and redefinition of their identities, while often simultaneously envisaging the promise of a better future.

It is precisely because of such potentialities that the memoir genre has also been adopted as a site of resistance, a form with which to transcend established boundaries and write back to the dominant narratives. In the context of this study, the possibilities of the genre

enable Keshavarz to articulate a very different subjectivity than those of dominant Iranian American memoirs. As Fotouhi has remarked, “The memoir allows for the voices of the marginal to regain their agency and subjectivity through very personal and remembered experiences by transcending boundaries of public/private, dominant/dominated, colonized/colonizer and offering multiplicities of alternative social narratives” (106). As the author of a rare, therefore “marginal”, Iranian-American memoir, Keshavarz effectively employs the genre to craft a memoir which, while working within the established norms of Iranian-American life writing, manages to challenge and subvert the dominant representations of Iran and Islam that pervade the account of her fellow Iranian-American memoirists.

Paramount in the discussion of the memoir is what is perceived as its ‘truth value’, which plays a significant role in its public and professional reception. Paula S. Fass has argued that historians see the memoir as “an important historical tool” (107) and maintains that the contemporary boom in memoir writing is partly “an expression of the widespread engagement with history in the contemporary world” (108). Furthermore, she attributes the genre’s appeal to “a growing sense of the speed of change and the declining importance of distance on our planet” (108). Along the same lines, George W. Egerton has argued that the attractions of the memoir appears “to derive from its capacity to personalize and dramatize political and historical phenomena, while often offering up a fare of sophisticated entertainment” (346). That memoirs often do offer historical and political insights is beyond question. Nevertheless, it is the engagement with the memoir as a “true account” offering social, historical, and political ‘facts’— as almost always advertised by the publishers and claimed by the authors — that in turn paves the way for an Orientalist perception of the Other, that pervades the preponderance of memoirs from the so-called Muslim world. Capitalizing on their truth claims and written for a Western audience, these memoirs “promise the Western reader access to the East, a promise that invokes a long history of colonial desire to unveil the simultaneously eroticized and abject Muslim woman” (Naghibi 81). It is against this backdrop that Fatemeh Keshavarz’s *Jasmine and Stars* embarks on demonstrating the complexities of the genre beyond a simplistic tell-all, “true account” façade. Perhaps having André Gide’s assertion in mind that “Memoirs are never more



than half sincere, however great the desire for truth" (248), through an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of the genre as well as by crafting her own 'resistant' memoir Keshavarz which enables the genre to operate at a more sophisticated level.

Nevertheless, as yet another testament to the pivotal role of the 9/11 in the emergence and reception of the trend in question, some scholars have demonstrated that the attention lavished upon Iranian-American memoirs in the West owes mostly to their pertinence to the broader political context of Islam and the Middle East rather than the literary merits of the texts (Adams; Vanzan). In this scheme of things, Iranian-American memoirists serve as mediators whose 'true' accounts are meant to familiarize their Western readers with the 'realities' of the Muslim world, especially as regards the status of its women. As Ali Behdad has argued,

That such neo-Orientalist texts are produced, published, and disseminated mainly in the United States and Western Europe suggests that their authors' investment in politics must be understood not as an oppositional demand for human rights or democracy by a subaltern subject but in relation to the neo-imperial interests and interventions of the United States in the region. (288)

I should hasten to add that although the pivotal role of 9/11 and the construction of Iran as "an axis of evil" has been fundamental in the proliferation of Iranian-American memoirs and in securing their success and reception in the West, the role of other significant factors should not be overlooked. One such factor is the rise of the second generation of Iranian-Americans, the majority of whom were either born or grew up in the United States. As such, their language proficiency and fuller immersion in the Western context has enabled them to assume more substantial roles in the production and presentation of their 'native' cultures.<sup>19</sup> While catering

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<sup>19</sup> Among such writers are Tara Bahrapour (*To See and See Again*- 1999), Azaddeh Moaveni (*Lipstick Jihad*- 2005 ; *Honeymoon in Tehran*- 2009), Porochista Khakpour (*Sons and Other Flammable Objects*- 2007), Jasmine Darznik (*The Good Daughter*- 2011), Davar Ardalan (*My Name is Iran*- 2007), Ava Homa (*Echoes from the Other Land*- 2010), Afschineh Latifi (*Even After All This Time*- 2005 ). There are many other senior Iranian-American writers, such as Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*- 2003), Fatemeh Keshavarz (*Jasmine and Stars*- 2007), Nahid Rachlin

to the post-9/11 zeitgeist in the U.S. is often regarded as the primary reason for the burgeoning of Iranian-American memoirs, the urge to write about the vicissitudes of exile, double-marginality, identity crisis, cultural rootlessness, and unbelonging, or what M. Persis Karim has tersely called “the tension of belonging to both – and neither – Iranian and U.S. cultures” (*A World Between* 25) experienced by this generation is also responsible for the boom in Iranian-American literary productions. This feeling of social ostracism and marginalization was at its peak during the post-Revolutionary years, and most specifically during the Hostage Crisis. While such accounts of displacement and exilic vicissitudes sound more ingenuous, they pale in comparison to the ones with overtly political overtones. Nor are they as nearly well-received as their neo-Orientalist counterparts, since they often do not conform to the Orientalist expectations of the average Western reader and do not tap into the Islamo-Iranophobic zeitgeist of the post-9/11 era. In this scheme of things, the role of the publishing industry, the news media and associated agencies cannot be overemphasized. From the perspective of the media, such accounts are not often deemed ‘newsworthy’. Firoozeh Dumas, the only Iranian-American female author who has opted for the language of humor in her two memoirs – *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003) and *Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of an Iranian American, at Home and Abroad* (2009) – summarized this attitude in an interview:

I have been travelling the country for five and half years, giving speeches. I give keynotes, I speak in colleges, and I have never had national press ... The truth is what I do is considered “soft news”... It’s not scary, that’s the problem. Shared humanity is considered soft news. But if I had written a book about hating a group of people, I guarantee you would’ve seen me by now on television. In fact, a few years ago, when *Funny in Farsi*, my first book, was a finalist for Thurber Prize for American Humor, I was scheduled to be on CNN ... and then the day before I got dumped. And I tuned in the next day because I wanted to know who they had dumped me for. And they dumped me for an author who had written a book about female suicide bombers ... and I

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(*Jumping over Fire*- 2005; *Persian Girls*- 2006), Roya Hakkakian (*Journey from the Land of No*- 2004), and NESTA Ramazani (*Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*- 2002) who published their first or major works after 9/11.

thought here we go again, having something about the Middle East that is frightening.  
(ForaTv)

Another sociocultural factor conducive to the burgeoning of Iranian-American memoirs is the shift in recent decades in the United States towards what Ali Behdad has called

disclosure as a dominant mode of social relations— a shift evident not only in the rhetoric of the war on terror, which encourages the willing surrender of civil rights for the supposed security of surveillance, but also in the ascendance of reality TV and other tell-tale genres to a position of pop culture dominance. (295)

The tendency for self-disclosure and revelation of one's private life can be observed in a whole array of cultural productions ranging from 'self-revelatory' literary forms to popular American TV series<sup>20</sup> or talk shows wherein people are encouraged to reveal the most private aspects of their personal lives. Similarly, the increasing role that social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and a host of similar online platforms, play in people's lives, encouraging constant status updating, photo and video sharing, can be regarded as contributing to the "disclosure" trend. The success of neo-Orientalist memoirs, therefore, can also be construed as part of the ascendance of popular genres centering on claims of 'reality' and 'authenticity'.

Undoubtedly, the memoirs produced in the past two decades have been instrumental in making these Iranian-American women more 'visible' in the public and literary domains in the United States. Besides the vast readership that the major productions in the trend in question have attracted, the myriad interviews, television appearances, book-reading sessions, awards, and other manners of publicity have certainly lent an unprecedented visibility and currency to Iranian-American women authors. Be that as it may, since the preponderance of such narratives operate within a well-established Western (neo)Orientalist frame of reference, they have led to even further discursive marginalization and disenfranchisement of Muslim/Iranian women

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<sup>20</sup> As famous instances of such television programs and series one can refer to "Sex and the City", "Dr. Phil", and the myriad "The Moment of Truth" style game shows.

living in Iran. This marginalization is carried out via an Orientalist-feminist outlook that persistently portrays the Iranian/Muslim women as veiled, oppressed, and passive victims of a 'patriarchal' culture and an Islamic government and deems their liberation possible only through the abandonment of their Islamic faith (exemplified by the shedding of the veil) and their embrace of Western values. Ironically, while such works are often deemed as conducive to the 'visibility' of Iranian women in Iran, by writing about their 'plights', by focusing on decontextualized accounts of their challenges and, especially, their 'veiling', they further contribute to their perceived invisibility and 'veiling'. Throughout her *Jasmine and Stars* (2007) – the subject of the fourth chapter – Fatemeh Keshavarz has thoroughly demonstrated how this visibility is often achieved at the cost of the invisibility of and disregard for many towering Iranian women figures in social, political, and literary domains. The discursive disenfranchisement of Iranian women is carried out through the modus operandi of recurring tropes of the negation of Iranian women's social and political agency. Such topoi obliterate the variegated tapestry of a lively female culture of both social participation as well as resistance in Iran. This is carried out mostly through denying the many significant improvements in almost every aspect of Iranian women's lives and positing their Western counterparts as a liberated and, therefore, superior model to aspire to. Such strategies of negation as well as the many manners in which Iranian women continue to assert their pivotal role in the fabric of Iranian society will be elaborated in details in the discussions of individual texts in the following chapters.

### **Constructing the Iranian Other in "Theory"**

The main analytical framework within which the three selected texts are critiqued derives mainly from Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism. In his classic *Orientalism* (1978), Said expounds the dominant attitudes of the West towards the Orient – especially the Muslim and Arab Orient – exemplified in the enormous corpus of scholarship produced by prominent Western writers within such diverse fields as philology, literature, anthropology, history, geography, philosophy, and psychology. In this scheme of things, the Orient and, by extension

Orientalists, are viewed as possessing such characteristics as “despotism”, “splendor”, “cruelty”, “sensuality” (5), “irrationality”, “depravity”, “childlikeness” (42), “separateness”, “eccentricity”, “backwardness”, “silent indifference”, “feminine penetrability”, “supine manipulability” (208), “strangeness”, “difference”, “exotic sensuousness” (74), and inability to self-govern (109, 230), to mention only a few.

Said proposes several definitions each of which focus on one facet of the Orientalist regime of representation. To begin with, Said defines Orientalism as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience” (1). Said further articulates the concept of Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (2). He then proceeds to define Orientalism by its hegemonic attributes:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

Said's next definition conceptualizes Orientalism as “a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient. The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways” (202).

In his conceptualization of Orientalism, Said draws upon Foucault's theorization of the nexus between knowledge and power, demonstrating how the West's *modus operandi* of knowledge production and promotion about its Oriental ‘Other’ are implicated in Western colonization and imperialism in the Orient. Thus, Said's *locus classicus* has it that texts of Orientalism “can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality that they appear to describe” (94). As such, he defines Orientalism as “a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient” (95). In other words, as Said avers along the same Foucauldian lines,

Ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied ... The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. (5)

It is precisely because of the nexus between discourse and power that the texts chosen are considered both in the broader historico-political context of their productions as well as how they serve to reinforce the dominant Western political agendas of the same context.

As ground-breaking as Said's theorization of Orientalism has been, it has had its fair share of criticisms and counter-responses. One common criticism leveled against Said is that he does not acknowledge his predecessors in theorizations of Orientalism in such earlier studies of disciplinary areas as linguistics, Islamic studies, anthropology, history, philosophy, and sociology. This, as Ziauddin Sardar avers, makes Said's contribution seem "to have emerged ready-made and fully-fledged, as though from nowhere, and proceeded to shape and dominate the debate" (66). In fact, Sardar goes as far as insinuating that Said's contribution to the field, on purely scholarly terms, is neither unique nor more substantial than his predecessors. However, he does contend that Said's work enkindled a vigorous and long-standing debate "focused specifically on something called 'the Orient'" (67).

The main criticism of Said's Orientalism, however, is the most ironic one: that like the discourse it criticizes, Said's account of Orientalism is monolithic and overlooks diversities, eclecticism, and nuances. In *Orientalism and Its Problems* (1994), for instance, Dennis Porter argues that

Unlike Foucault, who posits not a continuous discourse over time but epistemological breaks between different periods, Said asserts the unified character of Western discourse on the Orient over some two millennia, a unity derived from a common and continuous experience of fascination with and threat from the East, of its irreducible otherness. (130)

Inasmuch as the current study is concerned, even though Said makes a few references to the images of the ancient Persia in Aeschylus's *The Persians*, there is an almost total absence of modern Iran in *Orientalism*. This is significant since, due to the reasons mentioned earlier, Iran has occupied a paramount locus in the geopolitics of the Middle East both prior to and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and has always figured prominently in the historical Western imaginary. In this light, one could argue that Said's Orient is mostly trammled by the geographical specificity of the so-called Arab and Muslim worlds. This can be partly attributed to Said's own Arab/Palestinian background and, ipso facto, his greater familiarity with Arab territories and their figurations. Nevertheless, Said partially remedies this lacuna first in a series of articles published on the Islamic Revolution and the Hostage Crisis in Iran<sup>21</sup> and then in his *Covering Islam* (1981) which deals extensively with media representations of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Hostage Crisis in the United States. He draws critical attention to media images of Iranian Muslims, among others, as a violent, "anonymous", "deindividualized", and "dehumanized" mob (6, 35, 43, 48, 86, 87, 95, 101), and the Revolution as driven primarily by 'Islamic fanaticism'. These images pervade the first two texts analyzed in this study.

The criticisms of Said's model of Orientalism notwithstanding, his theorization of the concept proves particularly helpful in constructing a theoretical framework within which to probe representations of Iran and Islam in this study. Even though Said does not deal with Iran in his *Orientalism*, his meticulous observations on Islam and other Muslim countries are greatly useful in providing a vocabulary with which to analyze representations of Iran in post-9/11 Iranian-American literature.

Against the backdrop of Said's alleged overlooking of the heterogeneities of the subjects of representation, Homi K. Bhabha has theorized the notions of "ambivalence" and "mimicry" in colonial discourse, which serve to undermine Said's dichotomous epistemology by crafting a space for resisting the hegemony of colonial discourse. "The question of the representation of

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<sup>21</sup>*Islam, Orientalism, and the West: An Attack on Learned Ignorance* published in "Times" (1979); *Islam Through Western Eyes* published in "The Nation" (1980); *'Iran and the Press: Whose Holy War? Published in "Columbia Journalism Review" (1980); Inside Islam: How the Press Missed the Story in Iran* published in "Harper's Magazine" (1981)

difference”, Bhabha contends, “is always also a problem of authority” (*The Location of Culture* 89). In this light, Bhabha’s notion of “mimicry” can be helpful in understanding some of the questions of authority, authenticity, and author positionality – what I will be calling “double-situatedness” – in Iranian-American memoirs. Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence” (*The Location of Culture* 86). He further elaborates that mimicry is “the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (*The Location of Culture* 86). In the context of the current study, the “hybrid”, or hyphenated subjectivity of Iranian-American authors makes it possible to somewhat view their positionality in light of Bhabha’s theorizations of mimicry and ambivalence.

Other derivatives of Orientalism have proven particularly expedient in shedding light on certain aspects of the texts under study. One such offshoot of Orientalism is the concept of auto-Orientalism. Put succinctly, auto-Orientalism is self-discourse/Orientalist writings about Orientals by themselves (Carrier 36; Lie 5), mirrored in authorial deployment of “a native or seminitive insider tone” in Iranian-American memoirs (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 3). In the current study, the concept has been employed to illuminate the authorial situatedness and authority in critiquing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Jasmine and Stars*. In a similar vein, the concept of strategic auto-Orientalism adopted from Gayatri Spivak’s theorization of a “strategic” utilization of “essentialism”(183) through finessing the fluid nature of particular “essences” to discursively intervene in and negotiate about representations of the Other without necessarily consolidating them has been employed in discussions of resisting the discursive hegemony of Orientalist narratives in the chapter on *Jasmine and Stars*.

Given the centrality attributed to the representation of women in accounts of Iran and Islam, postcolonial and Third World feminist scholars have paid critical attention to such representations. In her *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988), Elizabeth V. Spellman avers that “the real problem” of certain brands of Western feminism is



how they have “confused the condition of one group of women with the condition of all” (4). In other words, much of Western scholarship on Third-World women is informed by a “universalism it assumes in encoding and representing all third world women as victims of an ahistorical and decontextualized notion of patriarchy that results in a homogenous notion of the oppressed third world women” (Elkholy). The irony in such universalist feminist discourse is that such homogenizing and essentializing of the notion of womanhood, as Chandra Mohanty has argued, “colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks” (72). There is, nonetheless, a greater irony in both the vocabulary of a universalist Western feminism that insists on representing Muslim women as “oppressed” and victims of “Islamic” violence – images that only serve to further Orientalize them – as well as the irony in U.S. interventionist policies towards those Muslim countries. This irony is the “blindness of first world complicity in various forms of third world oppressions” (Elkholy) exemplified in the role of the United States in pursuing policies or abetting regimes that perpetrate the violence (Fernandes 34).<sup>22</sup>

Even though the general theoretical structure of this dissertation is informed by Said’s theorization of Orientalism, it is, however, within the framework of what scholars have called a “Neo/New Orientalist” narrative that the works discussed in this study are best understood. Behdad and Williams have defined neo-Orientalism as “a mode of representation that while indebted to classical Orientalism, engenders new tropes of othering” (284).

A latter-day version of its 19<sup>th</sup>-century European forbear, neo-Orientalism also displays distinctive characteristics that distinguish it – not dramatically, though – from its classical predecessor. In the following, I will first enumerate some of the similarities between the two modes of Orientalism and proceed to articulate some of their differences, laid out mostly by the two prominent critics Professors Fatemeh Keshavarz and Ali Behdad. Following Behdad, here I will use the term *neo*-Orientalism (rather than Keshavarz’s *New* Orientalism) to

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<sup>22</sup> This is most obvious in the case of countries like Saudi Arabia who are key U.S. allies but possess an abysmal record of human, and especially women’s, rights.

emphasize the discursive continuity and internal consistency between the two manners of representation.

What Said has called the “internal consistency” (*Orientalism* 5) of Orientalism can be observed in the fact that, although conditioned by a very different historicity and produced by natives/semi-natives, the neo-Orientalist narratives are as “monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other” as their classical precursors (Behdad and Williams 284). Ironically, indeed, such narratives have proven to be more silencing, totalitarian, and oppressive than the “regimes” and social structures and traditions in the cultures they criticize, as often the multiplicity of voices, complexities, and nuances of the ‘natives’ are stifled under the domineering voice and presence of the author. As in classical Orientalist narratives, such totalizing and silencing effects are achieved through the deployment of such strategies as negation, affirmation, oversimplification, dehistoricization, decontextualization, feminization, and infantilization which result in a polarized and monochromatic image of the Other that totally obliterates what Keshavarz has termed the “multihued tapestry of human voice and experience” (*Jasmine and Stars* 241)

In a similar vein, like its classical precedent, as a major strategy of rendering the Other inferior, the neo-Orientalist discourse attributes anything that is “too impressive to be immediately considered or rejected as inferior... to a glorious but discontinued past” (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 3). In the case of Iran – and Islam, too – this discursive strategy is practiced much more frequently, given the country’s ancient past as one of the world’s greatest empires. This strategy is most obvious in Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* where the contemporary Iranian society is portrayed as devoid of any literary tradition and Persian classical literary masterpieces are rendered anachronistic and attributed to an irretrievable and long bygone past.

There are, however, significant features that distinguish neo-Orientalist narratives from their precursors. To begin with, although the provenance of neo-Orientalism is predominantly

North America, the phenomenon transcends the geographical boundaries of the United States to include other European countries, albeit, to a lesser extent. Likewise, in distinction to classical Orientalism, neo-Orientalist cultural productions are not merely produced by Western subjects. Rather, Middle Eastern authors, scholars, and pseudo-pundits far outnumber the Western writers in both the production and propagation of neo-Orientalist narratives. Also, whereas classical Orientalists were commonly male European intelligentsia, missionaries, and scholars, neo-Orientalist authors tend to be predominantly female 'natives' whose assumption of authenticity authorizes their discourses. Moreover, their investment in the "moral authority" and "special immunity" they enjoy as 'heroes' and ostensible survivors of 'Islamic fundamentalism', 'patriarchy', and 'violence' render them almost "impervious to critique" in their popular reception (Behdad and Williams 295); this fact is reflected not only in the disproportionate praise for such texts but also by counter-responses to the criticisms. This, in fact, is one of the major factors that lends more urgency to a meticulous critique of the trend in question.<sup>23</sup>

What further distinguishes classical Orientalism from its contemporary counterpart is the popularity, immediacy, and accessibility of the neo-Orientalist discourse made possible by the ascendancy of the age of information technology across the world (Behdad and Williams 284). Furthermore, both the self-proclaimed authenticity as well as the accessibility of neo-Orientalist accounts, or what Behdad has called "a journalistic pretense of direct access to truth and the real" (284) contrasts the "will to knowledge" (Said *Orientalism* 272) of classical Orientalism. Insofar as the historical specificity of such accounts are concerned, one could claim safely that with very few exceptions, the neo-Orientalist narratives – whether by Iranian-Americans or other Middle Easterners – have been published in the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, and informed by the urgency and yearning to represent the 'threat' of the (terrorist/fundamentalist) Muslim Other.

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<sup>23</sup> Chief in this category is Manijeh Mannani's scathing criticism in *Reading Beyond Jasmine and Stars*, produced as a response to professor Fatemeh Keshavarz's criticism of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in her *Jasmine and Stars* (2007).

The other significant distinguishing feature of neo-Orientalist narratives is their open and “unapologetic investment in and engagement with the politics of the Middle East” (Behdad and Williams 285). While Orientalist accounts served to justify the colonial presence of Europe in the Orient, this was mostly achieved through a narration that rendered the natives as essentially inferior to their Western colonizers and, therefore, in need of being ‘civilized’ (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 2). Not only do neo-Orientalist authors partake openly in the politics of their respective countries, they are at times recruited and promoted by the political agendas that benefit from such representations. This is evident in the case of Azar Nafisi’s alignment with the neo-conservative coterie in the United States, which will be elaborated in greater details in the chapter on *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

What Behdad has termed “ahistorical historicism”, is another characteristic of the neo-Orientalist discourse. In essence, “ahistorical historicism” entails various modes of historical misrepresentation and falsification of current events in the Middle East coupled with the denial of the United States’ neo-imperialistic agendas in the region (285). Thus, while both Mahmoody and Nafisi misrepresent such landmark events in the contemporary Iranian history as the Islamic Revolution and the War, they simultaneously engage in the utter negation of the role of the U.S. and the West in both events. Such blatant instances of negation are made all the more expedient by the general Western readers’ unfamiliarity with the history and politics of the Middle East.

Insofar as the tropes of Othering are concerned, the neo-Orientalist discourse is conditioned by a re-appropriation of the topos of the veil as the epitome of Muslim women’s oppression and victimization. While the classical Orientalist discourse employed the veil mostly to exoticize the Oriental woman and metonymize images of the harem as a space charged with Oriental mysteriousness, sensuality, and inaccessibility (à la *One Thousand and One Nights*), the neo-Orientalist discourse deploys the veil as a signifier of Muslim women’s oppression and invisibility (Behdad and Williams 285). In their Orientalist-feminist frame of reference, such accounts represent the veil as the principal impediment to Muslim women’s visibility, mobility, and even the realization of their ‘true’ subjectivity. As a result, reinforce the binary opposition

of a free, liberated, secular, and democratic West vis-à-vis its oppressed, primitive, and tyrannical Oriental other. In other words, the veil serves as a locus within which a ‘civilizing’ relationship is forged between the West and its Muslim Others. Specifically, “The veil sanctions a paternalistic and neo-imperial relation between the West and Muslim societies by enabling a discourse of rescue” (Behdad and Williams 294).

Unlike their classical counterparts, some of the neo-Orientalist narratives, particularly *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, are characterized by a “hybrid nature” in that they adopt an informal tone, often in the form of addressing the reader directly, while engaging simultaneously in sophisticated academic or literary commentary to further establish the ‘expert’ authority of the author.<sup>24</sup> While this feature is not shared by all such memoirs, it figures prominently in the two post-9/11 memoirs by Nafisi and Keshavarz discussed in this study. Nevertheless, as Keshavarz has demonstrated, almost all neo-Orientalist narratives capitalize on “the power of personal voice, nostalgia in exilic literature, the assurance that comes with insider knowledge, and the certainty of eyewitness accounts” (*Jasmine and Stars* 4), features that go a long way towards explaining the popularity and ‘truth value’ of such accounts in the West.

The highly contested ‘truth claim’ of neo-Orientalist narratives can help account for another of their common denominators. Despite their unprecedented popularity in the West, almost none of the neo-Orientalist accounts are translated into the ‘native’ language of their authors. In case of Iranian-American memoirs, the only exception is Firouzeh Dumas’ *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* (2003), which seems to have been published mostly on account of its effective employment of humor in a personal narrative that does not capitalize on demonization of its subject for its popular success. Besides their dubious truth value, the unavailability of such translations in native tongues may be attributed to their lack of literary merits compared with indigenous literary productions, their formulation within and

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<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that the first-person narration or employment of an informal tone is unique to neo-Orientalist discourses, as they are often quite common denominators of a variety of autobiographical writings. Rather, they are features that both characterize neo-Orientalist writings and partially set them apart from their classical predecessors.

prioritization of a Western frame of reference with which few ‘natives’ would identify, their unapologetic demonization of native cultures, as well as possible state censorship.

### **Iranian Others in Others’ Literature**

Since the current study navigates a whole array of concepts such as Orientalism, feminism, captivity narratives, reception, and resistance (to hegemonic discourses), a vast body of literature on the mentioned subjects has been drawn upon in the analyses of the selected memoirs. Some of the most significant sources exploited in this study provide a general framework for analyzing Western representations of the Other – such as the works of Said, Bhabha, Keshavarz, and Behdad – which were already mentioned in the preceding discussions of the study’s theoretical frameworks. There are other significant texts, such as Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which similarly furnished a critical apparatus in discussions of resistance against hegemony of the colonial/Orientalist discourse and Parvin Paidar’s seminal study, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran* (1995), which builds on Said’s theorization of Orientalism to formulate the interconnected lineaments of Orientalist feminism. In the following, I will review some of the major literature most apposite to the subject of each chapter.

Despite the enormous popularity of Betty Mahmoody’s *Not Without My Daughter*, very few critical analyses of the memoir have been conducted. In fact, responses to the book were mostly restricted to highly acclamatory book (and film) reviews and passing references in discussions of broader relevant issues. The only major work has been Deborah Cunningham Walker’s Master of Arts thesis *Veiled Images: Eurocentrism in “Not Without My Daughter”* (1999), which examines Eurocentric media stereotypes in the cinematic adaptation of the book. Even so, what is particularly ironic in Walker’s analysis is that her supposedly scholarly study betrays extensive ignorance of some basic sociocultural facts about the country and religion she sets out to demystify. For instance, Walker’s analysis suffers from a persistent Western confusion of Iranians with Arabs, and even though the author provides a historical overview of the Persian Empire down to the Iran-Iraq War, she employs the term “Arabic” interchangeably

with Persian, Iranian, and Muslim, and often contextualizes many contemporary Iranian cultural traditions in terms of tribal and Bedouin, no less, Arab mores (62, 67, 69, 72, 73, 94).<sup>25</sup> Such confusions are a further testament to the extent to which Iran is misrepresented in the media and popular culture, but also to an inexcusable inaccuracy and negligence in works of academic and scholarly nature vis-à-vis Iran and Islam.

When I started my extensive readings for this dissertation, the corpus of scholarly studies available on Iranian-American memoirs mostly entailed a series of journal articles and a few Master of Arts theses on the subject. Nevertheless, as the body of Iranian-American literature has been rapidly expanding, more critical responses – mostly by Iranian scholars or hyphenated Iranians in the West – have been produced. This dissertation, therefore, is situated within a rather nascent critical terrain in a way that is in dialogue with the scholarship in the field, but also addresses lacunae and areas underexplored by other researchers, not only through its engagement with the issue of representation but also by devoting two of the three chapters to works that are either almost totally understudied (as in the case of Mahmoody's memoir) or have not received the critical attention they deserve (as is the case with *Jasmine and Stars*). Therefore, it is both through its methodology and the choice of texts that this study asserts a distinct place in the ongoing scholarship produced on Iranian-American memoirs.

One dominant cluster of articles addresses broader issues of autobiographical writing in Iranian-American literary productions and analyzes such works primarily in terms of the conditions of the exile, trauma, nostalgia, memory, identity, displacement, and homecoming.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Evelyn Alsultany argues that in the aftermath of the Hostage Crisis the conflation of Iranians with Arabs was reinforced and "Iran came to stand for Arabs, the Middle East, Islam and terrorism, all of which terms came to be used interchangeably" (9).

<sup>26</sup> Notable in this category are, chronologically, Nilou Mostofi's *Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity* (2003), Babak Elahi's *Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs* (2006), Amy Malek's *Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis" Series* (2006), Jasmine Darznik's *The Perils and Seductions of Home: Return Narratives of the Iranian Diaspora* (2008), Liora Hendelman-Baavur's *Guardians of New Spaces: "Home" and "Exile" in Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran, Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis Series and Azadeh Moaveni's Lipstick Jihad* (2008), Amy Motlagh's *Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing* (2008), Gillian Whitlock's *From Tehran to Tehrangeles: The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs* (2008), Nima Naghibi's *Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women's Autobiographies* (2009), Amy Motlagh's *Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora* (2011), and Farzaneh Milani's *Iranian Women's Life Narratives* (2013).

Even though such critical analyses have at times been drawn upon in this study and do serve to contextualize and demonstrate the heterogeneity of the Iranian-American autobiographical landscape, they do not feature significantly in this study for their lack of engagement with the problematics of Orientalism and representation and their broader implications in the context of the post-9/11 era.

Owing to the multifaceted narrative quality of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which interweaves social and political commentary, personal anecdotes, and sophisticated literary discussions, as well as the many contentious assertions and assumptions made in the text, Nafisi's memoir has elicited far more critical responses than any other Iranian-American memoir. The titles of most such responses imitate or are variations on the title of Nafisi's memoir, a fact that further testifies to the controversial nature of a text the contentiousness of which begins from its very title.<sup>27</sup> While some of these responses deal more specifically with the question of (teaching English) literature in the memoir,<sup>28</sup> others focus on a variety of feminist representational politics. The most significant and exhaustive critical analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is Professor Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (2007). In her memoir that which blends personal reminiscences, social commentary, and meticulous literary analyses of prominent Persian literary texts in a manner similar to Nafisi, with a critique of Nafisi's text, Keshavarz posits *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a "New

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<sup>27</sup> Some of the major responses to Nafisi include, chronologically, Roksana Bahramitash's *The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers* (2005), Hamid Dabashi's *Lolita and Beyond* (2006), Mitra Rastegar's *Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and "Liberating" Iranian Women* (2006), Firoozeh Papan-Matin's *Reading (and Misreading) Lolita in Tehran* (2007), Catherine Burwell's *Reading Lolita in Times of War: Women's Book Clubs and the Politics of Reception* (2007), John Carlos Rowe's *Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran in Idaho* (2007), Catherine Burwell, Hilary E. Davis, and Lisa K. Taylor's *Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns* (2008), Amy DePaul's *Re-Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2008), Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh's *Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2008), Seyed Mohammed Marandi's *Reading Azar Nafisi in Tehran* (2008), and Asha S.'s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: Rehashing Orientalist Stereotypes* (2009).

<sup>28</sup> From among this category some noteworthy titles are Kate Flint's *Women and Reading* (2006), Simon Hay's *Why Read Reading Lolita? Teaching Critical Thinking in a Culture of Choice* (2008), Georgiana Banita's *Affect, Kitsch and Transnational Literature: Azar Nafisi's Portable Worlds* (2009), and Jodi Melamed's *Reading Tehran in Lolita: Seizing Literary Value for Neoliberal Multiculturalism* (2011),



Orientalist” memoir *par excellence*. While criticizing the New Orientalist narrative epitomized by Nafisi’s work for its lack of specificity, demonization of Muslim cultures, and almost total negation of indigenous literary, artistic, social, and political dynamism, Keshavarz constructs her own counter-hegemonic discourse by foregrounding what the “New Orientalist” narratives characteristically tend to disregard. In so doing, she capitalizes on personal reminiscences, her identification with both the Eastern and Western loci, and her expert knowledge of both Persian and English literatures to effectively produce a narrative that is as counter-Orientalist as Nafisi’s is (neo)Orientalist.

Professor Hamid Dabashi’s 2007 *Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire* also bears noting as the most controversial response to Nafisi’s memoir. In his animadversion of the memoir, published on Al-Ahram Weekly, Dabashi expounds the “politically expedited collective amnesia --of manufacturing consent” in the West for U.S. military interventionism in a period he observes is the most belligerent in U.S. history. Dabashi effectively demonstrates how Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and a myriad of kindred novels are implicated in U.S. imperialism and cultivating U.S. public opinion against Iran by cannibalizing the predicament of Muslim women and placing it “squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op, militarily stipulated in the US global warmongering”. He further buttresses his hypothesis by revealing Nafisi’s political links to major U.S. neo-conservative figures such as Bernard Lewis and Paul Wolfowitz. Also, Dabashi takes Nafisi to task for her total elimination of the contemporary literary tradition in Iran and “positing English literature yet again as a modus operandi of manufacturing trans-regional cultural consent to Euro-American global domination” after the fashion of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British colonialism. While some scholars contend that Dabashi has gone too far in his criticism of Nafisi (Byrne “A Collision”), his article goes a long way towards demonstrating the interface between literature and hegemony/imperialism after the fashion of his late colleague and comrade, Edward Said.

Contrary to Nafisi’s memoir, due to its much less controversial and more even-handed treatment of the vast range of issues it covers, *Jasmine and Stars* has elicited many fewer critical responses. Manijeh Mannani’s *Reading beyond Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than*

*Lolita in Tehran* (2009) remains the major critical response to Keshavarz's memoir hitherto. In her criticism of Keshavarz's memoir, Mannani fulminates against Keshavarz for what she deems as her possession of "an infallible memory", her "beautification of the Iranian culture", and a criticism of Nafisi's memoir which is "far from objective and realistic" (322-23). Eventually, though, Mannani's whitewashing of Nafisi's numerous exaggerations, sociohistorical falsifications, and distaste for things Iranian and Islamic, coupled with her vitriol against *Jasmine and Stars* reduces her response to an ad hominem attack on Keshavarz and her work.

Since undertaking the present doctoral thesis, a number of theses and dissertations on the topic of Iranian-American memoirs have emerged. Like other critical responses mentioned earlier, this academic attention to the phenomenon of post-9/11 Iranian-American literary productions has been largely on account of the sudden visibility of Iranian-American memoirs and their authors' newfound agency as cultural and political 'mediators' and 'experts' on issues related to Iran and Islam. Also, such studies have occasionally been framed as a way of writing back to the hegemony and dominance of such narratives. In her thesis *Whiteness, Orientalism and Immigration: A Critique of Two Iranian Exilic Memoirs* (2008), Sara Saljoughi positions her argument at the interface between representation, race, and immigration and investigates how "a discourse of racialized whiteness that is a feature and governing principle of Western immigration" can contribute to an "attempt to control and 'liberate' the Muslim migrant subject" (iii). In another thesis, *American Scheherazades – Auto-orientalism, Literature and the Representations of Muslim Women in a Post 9/11 U.S. Context* (2012), Martina Koegeler juxtaposes the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) and a volume of poetry, *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) by the Arab-American writer Mohja Kahf with Nafisi's memoir to demonstrate how "Arab/Muslim American women writers employ varying forms of auto-orientalism to gain access to the U.S. literary market via citation of orientalist tropes and thus actively participate in the majority discourses surrounding Islam, Muslim women and Americanness" (iii). Through the examination of the works of Azar Nafisi and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Katayoun Zarei Toossi's dissertation, *Dislodging (New) Orientalist Frames of Reference: Muslim Women in Diasporic and Immigrant Muslim Anglophone Narratives* (2012) demonstrates "how

a variety of Muslim narratives in English problematize the perception of religiosity as always being a result of the imposition of external forces that are invariably oppressive or politically charged”.

Three other significant dissertations offer a broader survey of Iranian-American literary landscape, rather than focusing on individual works: Jasmin Darznik’s *Writing Outside the Veil: Literature by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2007), which the author claims to be “the first full-length study of Iranian immigrant literature” (iii), Sanaz Fotouhi’s *Ways of Being, Lines of Becoming: A Study of Post-Revolutionary Diasporic Iranian Literature in English* (2012) , and most recently Cyrus Amiri’s *Two Thousand and One Scheherazades: Images of the Father and 'Fatherland' in Post-9/11 Novels and Memoirs by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (2013). All the foregoing theses and dissertations, except for Amiri’s, share one major denominator of post-9/11 Iranian-American writings: that they are all produced by (hyphenated) Iranian women. This itself negates the neo-Orientalist assumption, particularly capitalized on in Nafisi’s memoir, of the absence, or inattention, of a contemporary literary tradition in Iran. It bears mentioning that what distinguishes the current dissertation from its predecessors is that it is the first study which identifies paradigmatic representations of Iran (rather than random texts) both pre- and post-9/11 and culminates with an analysis of the most significant ‘resistant’ narrative. As such, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, it is also the only academic research hitherto conducted that offers a meticulous critique of the works of Betty Mahmoudy (*Not Without My Daughter*) and Fatemeh Keshavarz (*Jasmine and Stars*) as individual texts (and not as part of a broader designation). Also, even though critiques of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* figure in some of the studies mentioned above, they are mostly focused on a particular aspect of the memoir, whereas this study attempts to cover as many facets of Nafisi’s work as possible. These distinctive features are explained in the following organization of the study.

### **Configuration of the Study**

The current research is presented in 5 chapters. Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, the main textual, and contextual, analyses of the works under study are organized in a three-tier

body chapter design, dealing respectively with Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter* (1978), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), and Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars: Reading Beyond Lolita in Tehran* (2007). These texts share a number of characteristics that explain their selection for the purposes of this study. Firstly, all three texts enjoy an iconic status in their significance to the Western discourse vis-à-vis Iran and Islam, their reception by their Western readerships, and the Orientalist/counter-Orientalist trend that each exemplifies, and their broader implications both for the Iranian 'Other' they tend to represent and the American audiences they intend to reach. Thus, Betty Mahmoody's bestselling *Not Without My Daughter*, critiqued in Chapter Two, epitomizes representations of the post-Revolutionary Iran before 9/11. The third chapter engages in a critical evaluation of Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,<sup>29</sup> as the quintessential post-9/11 female Iranian-American memoir. Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars* is the topic of the fourth chapter, which is selected as the most significant memoir to date that both diverges from the (neo)Orientalist discourse exemplified by the first two texts and simultaneously seeks to subvert it.

In addition to the iconic status these texts enjoy, they all rely in their representations on thematic commonalities specific to post-Revolutionary Iran: The 1979 Islamic Revolution, the 1980 Iraqi-imposed war on Iran, the Islamic faith, and the question of Iranian/Muslim women and particularly the veil. Similarly, even though they are at times referred to broadly as autobiographical writings by Iranian-American women, the texts under study fall more specifically within the genre of memoir writing. As such, each of the three texts focuses principally on particular junctures in the life of the autobiographical narrator. While Mahmoody's account chronicles her 'captivity' in Iran in the mid-1980s (a few years after the Islamic Revolution and amidst the Iran-Iraq war), Nafisi's memoir recounts the same turbulent

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<sup>29</sup> Even though Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* series (a *Bildungsroman* of sorts) has been a major bestselling title in Iranian memoirs written in the West, it has not been considered in this study for several reasons. Firstly, Satrapi (and her 'memoirs') do not belong to the category of Iranian-American literature. *Persepolis* was originally written in French in 2000 and translated into English in 2003. Also, *Persepolis* is a 'graphic' memoir and hence does not share the formal characteristics of the works critiqued in this study. More importantly, Satrapi's memoir does not display the thematic and representational complexities of Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and therefore could not be selected as the iconic post-9/11 Iranian-American memoir.

period of Revolution and War in a longer span of almost two decades. In a similar vein, Keshavarz's narrative engages with questions of the Revolution and the War, returning to them on different occasions, but also frequently draws on recollections of her childhood and early youth and her experiences and encounters in the West. In this sense, one could say that the temporality of Keshavarz's narrative is more disjointed than the two previous memoirs, mostly due to the fact that she has organized her discussions based on particular prominent figures in her life – "stars", as she would dub them – rather than specific historical junctures.

The three chosen memoirs also share another significant feature. All three texts are written by women whose claims to belonging to both the Western and Eastern worlds – through birth, education, and having lived in both hemispheres – seem to qualify them for representing Iran and Islam and impart a certain (implicit and explicit) authority and authenticity to their representations. In this light, the works of all three authors can be broadly defined as belonging to the body of Iranian-American literature in English and published in the United States.

Besides the denominators all three texts share, there are also contextual features that are shared alternately between two of the texts. For instance, both *Not Without My Daughter* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* achieved bestseller status on *The New York Times* bestseller list ("Paperback Best Sellers"). This bears particular significance since it further corroborates the iconic status of each text and its enthusiastic reception in the West, and therefore further justifies their selection as paradigmatic texts in their (neo-)Orientalist representations of Iran. Also, both *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Jasmine and Stars* can be designated as academic memoirs, not only because both authors are academics by profession, but also that they are both literature professors and their works engage in serious and in-depth discussions of English and Persian literatures respectively. In addition, both authors belong to the "first generation" women of the Iranian-American diaspora, which renders the comparative analysis of their works more warranted. In this light, one could argue that Nafisi's memoir is well-placed as the third (that is, the intermediate) body chapter of this dissertation since on the one hand, it best exemplifies the consummation of an Orientalist discourse vis-à-vis Iran initiated in earnest after

the Islamic Revolution by *Not Without My Daughter*; on the other hand, due to the many thematic and structural commonalities between Nafisi's memoir with that of Keshavarz, it serves as a bridge between *Not Without My Daughter* and *Jasmine and Stars*, making for a smooth transition from discussions of (neo)Orientalist discourse and Western hegemony towards a different narrative of resistance and subversion.

The choice of Mahmoody's memoir along with other (strictly) "Iranian-American" memoirs needs to be further qualified. The initial idea for this dissertation was to investigate specifically the upsurge in the production of Iranian-American memoirs written by female authors of the Iranian diaspora in the post-9/11 United States and to focus on representations of Iran in some of the bestselling titles. Nevertheless, as the extensive preliminary readings of the literature that fell within the scope of the current study progressed, the thematic and conceptual impress of Mahmoody's memoir beckoned. Hence, owing both to its pioneering status in representations of Iran as well as the striking similarity between the representational *modus operandi* of the post-9/11 memoirs with this text, the scope of the study was stretched to include *Not Without My Daughter* (1987),<sup>30</sup> a modern American captivity narrative *par excellence*, which remains "the most popular book ever published in the US about Iran" to date (Milani "On Women's Captivity" 43).

Beside its paradigmatic status in Western literary representations of Iran, there were other factors that justified the choice of Mahmoody's memoir. Even though Mahmoody may not strictly belong to the category of "Iranian-American", the U.S.-born author was married to an Iranian doctor and spent about two years in the country. Hence, like all Iranian-American memoirs, the purchase of this dual situatedness – that is, the compradorial, intermediary position – serves to sanction the assumption of a 'privileged' access to 'inside' information. This serves to authorize Mahmoody's consideration along with the other two Iranian-American authors whose 'hyphenated' identity allegedly empowers them to represent – or rather 'produce' – their native country for the consumption of their Western audience. Also, Mahmoody's work shares the majority of the thematic and formal lineaments of the memoirs

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<sup>30</sup> A cinematic adaptation of the story by the same name ensued in 1991.

that would emerge in the post-9/11 milieu. Another major factor – and a major challenge, indeed – in the choice of Mahmoody's work was the fact that, as previously mentioned, no significant scholarly critique of Mahmoody's book was found at the time of the composition of this dissertation and discussions of the book were confined to book reviews and passing references in the analysis of other texts and broader concepts. This limitation made the effort all the more worthwhile to critique *the* paradigmatic contemporary Western text in representations of Iran, shedding light on its rhetoric of Orientalist Othering as well as its reception in the West. It is, therefore, fitting to initiate the analysis of the representations of Iran by critiquing Mahmoody's memoir.

Throughout her memoir, Mahmoody draws heavily on what she postulates as irresolvable differences between Eastern and Western cultures and – as is characteristic of Orientalist writings – her text reinforces the idea of such essential differences, by positioning them on a value-laden binary of a civilized West vis-à-vis its 'primitive' Eastern Other. By virtue of the 'authority' vested by her 'superior' Western-ness in her as someone able to allegedly see through the Muslim Oriental psyche,<sup>31</sup> and her access to the interiority of 'Oriental' spaces Mahmoody sees it fit to conclude that Iranians are filthy (15, 23, 27, 28, 31, 32, 36, 37, 85, 231, 335, 65), mad, scheming (220), corrupt (17), violent (21), hostile (342), lazy (429), eager to kill (203), unorganized (35), unpredictable (342), animal-like (41), and more than anything else, strange (45). By such representations Mahmoody forges an "Other" that best corresponds with the image of the Iranian "enemy" that the United States has been promulgating since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The trajectory from the critique of Mahmoody's memoir in Chapter One to Nafisi's in Chapter Two is informed by an Orientalist discursive continuity which regurgitates much of the underlying motifs in *Not Without My Daughter* against a similar sociopolitical background but discussed through the lens of British and American literary classics and published in the post-9/11 age.

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<sup>31</sup> Since Orientalism, as a mode of Western knowledge production operating through the recycling of stereotypes, makes it possible to "know" the Orientals.

This “internal consistency of Orientalist discourse”, as Jamal Eddine Benhayoun has argued, “is meant to perpetuate and naturalise the practice of polarizing the world in terms of Manichean categories such as Self and Other, Orient and Occident, and Western and anti-Western” (119). Furthermore, both narratives are characterized by a blurring of the boundaries of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, where history is perpetually dehistoricized, decontextualized, and fictionalized and fiction and myths are historicized and ‘actualized’. Chapter Three, thus, offers a brief synopsis of Nafisi’s bestselling memoir and proceeds to examine both its popular and critical reception in the West. In the critique of Nafisi’s memoir, I have attempted to cover the wide range of issues the text presents that underpin Orientalist stereotypes. Thus, the chapter offers an in-depth reading of the representations of Iranian/Muslim women as “damsels in distress” and focuses on the topos of the veil in the context of the Orientalist feminism conducive to the perpetuation of such images. Taking the political zeitgeist of the memoir’s production (that is, the post-9/11 atmosphere) the chapter demonstrates the interface between representations of Iran and Islam and the neo-conservative political agenda vis-à-vis the Muslim world in the United States. Furthermore, a discussion of the text’s controversial front cover as well as the appropriation of Western literature as a ‘liberating’ medium for Iranian/Muslim women is proffered to cover as many of the contentious issues put forward in the memoir as possible.

From the discussion of Nafisi’s memoir as the paradigmatic neo-Orientalist narrative in Chapter Three, the trajectory of the study moves to a counter-hegemonic representation of Iran and Islam in Fatemeh Keshavarz’s memoir in Chapter Four. As mentioned earlier, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* has been selected as the epitome of a ‘resistant’ discourse challenging the neo-Orientalist narrative on representations of Iran and Islam. In this section, a chapter-by-chapter analysis of Keshavarz’s memoir is presented whereby the author’s discursive strategies of resistance and constructing a counter-narrative are elucidated. Besides Nafisi’s, Keshavarz’s memoir is the only other ‘academic’ memoir and is similarly qualified by a confluence of the academic, the personal, and the fictional. Like Nafisi, Keshavarz interweaves the accounts of her academic career, her personal stories, and the analysis of



iconic texts from Persian literature to formulate her narrative. Unlike Nafisi, however, she does so to arrive at a counter-hegemonic and counter-Orientalist representation of her native country and religion, which she deems conspicuously absent from the body of Orientalist representations promoted by Iranian-American memoirs:

Portraits of people or of social and cultural conditions should be like tapestries woven out of a hundred different threads, or like mosaics made of many tiles. When there are holes in the tapestry or tiles missing, the entire picture is distorted. Like many works contributing to the New Orientalist narrative, *RLT* contains a few patches of truth. In its entirety, however, it is a tapestry with many holes, a mosaic that has every other piece missing. (*Jasmine and Stars* 18)

As different as Keshavarz's memoir of the missing Iranian story is in its authorial intention and analysis, it is presented through fairly similar thematic and formal frameworks and thus operates within the same boundaries set by the dominant body of Iranian-American memoirs. This, in turn, lends greater effectiveness to Keshavarz's arguments and strikes a ready chord with her intended audience, since the text is located within the same structural and thematic formulations as those with which the audience are already familiar. Throughout the chapter, I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which Keshavarz provides an alternative lens with which to read Iranian society and literature, mostly by capitalizing on prominent Persian literary giants such as Rumi, as well as by drawing on her personal narratives, which serve to counterpoise those of the "New Orientalist" memoirs. Finally, Chapter Five presents an overview of the study and concluding remarks. It also offers suggestions for further possible research related to the works critiqued in this dissertation.

## Chapter Two

### ***Not Without My Daughter: The Mother of Neo-Orientalist Best-sellers***

Twenty years before Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) would sing, “Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran,” to the old Beach Boys tune “Barbara Ann,” the idea was proposed in the most popular book ever published in the US about Iran. (Milani “On Women's Captivity” 43)

The only thing that could ever straighten out this screwed-up country is an atomic bomb! Wipe it off the map and start over. (Mahmoody and Hoffer 272)

In the most recent poll conducted in spring 2015 by the Pew Research Center, 76 percent of Americans harbored an unfavorable view of Iran (Zainulbhai and Wike), while 47 percent regarded Iran as the United States’ “greatest enemy”, according to another 2014 Gallup poll (Jones).<sup>1</sup> Both polls were carried out in the context of ongoing saber-rattling about an impending war against Iran, if the prolonged nuclear negotiations failed. The prospect of a war against Iran, as almost all international political pundits unanimously contend, would be little short of an Armageddon, or as Michel Chossudovsky has argued a “World War III scenario” (46). The United States’ hawkish official stance that it has no qualms about bombing Iran is evident in Obama’s belligerent “All options are on the table” and “I don’t bluff” rhetoric (Heller). Also, almost all Republican candidates of America’s last presidential election have insisted that the “military option” must remain on the proverbial “negotiating table” as the only viable alternative out of Iran’s trumped-up “nuclear issue”, even after a historic deal has been reached with Iran. In this context, it is particularly important to observe how the image of the United States’ most recent “enemy” and the next possible military target is ingrained in the collective American consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> It has to be added that the figure is significantly lower than that of the previous polls conducted earlier, perhaps mostly owing to such factors as Iran’s initial nuclear agreement with the six “world powers”, the war in Syria, and the rise of ISIS in the Middle East.

The past two decades have witnessed the ever-increasing advancement of technology and the proliferation of digital and online resources, which have in turn made the dissemination of, and access to, information significantly more convenient. In particular, such technologies are often characterized by a sense of immediacy made possible by the instantaneous publishing and broadcasting of news, especially facilitated through such social media as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and the like. In the context of this discussion, these media and modes of communication have also significantly contributed to a much greater exposure to representations of the Other, with news, documentaries, and footage of the Third World being instantly available in diverse virtual environments. The upsurge of interest after 9/11 in getting to know the 'Muslim enemy' brought the representation and the 'threat' of the so-called Muslim World even more into the focus.

As far as representations of Iran are concerned, when the digital era had not yet fully developed and the majority of present-day online information sources were either nonexistent or far from ubiquitous, Betty Mahmoody's unprecedented and trend-setting international best-seller, *Not without My Daughter* (1987),<sup>2</sup> was the first major work of popular literature on Iran. The book, and its eponymous 1991 Hollywood film version, introduced Americans, and by extension the Western world, to post-revolutionary Iran; for large sections of the American public this text offered an initiation in Iranophobia.

*Not Without My Daughter* chronicles Betty Mahmoody's marriage-gone-wrong to an American-educated Iranian-born anesthesiologist, Dr. Seyed Bozorg Mahmoody – known in the book by the nickname Moody – who had lived in the U.S. for more than two decades. According to the book, in August 1984, at the time of Iraq's war<sup>3</sup> against the fledgling Islamic Republic of Iran, Betty Mahmoody encouraged her husband to travel to Iran for what the author claims was meant to be a two-week holiday (50). The holiday, we are told, stretches into an eighteen-month "entrapment" from which the American 'heroine' liberates herself when she puts her

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, the title will be henceforth abbreviated as *NWMD*, except if it appears at the start of a sentence.

<sup>3</sup> The war is commonly known as the Iran-Iraq War or the First Persian Gulf war. However, since Iraq was the perpetrator of the war, in Iran it is often referred to as "The Imposed War" or "The Holy Defense".

life, and that of her six-year-old daughter, on the line by fleeing the country through the mountains on the border between Iran and Turkey in the dead of winter.

The book, however, is no typical action-and-suspense thriller. While on the surface Mahmoody's memoir narrates the account of a failed intermarriage between a white American woman and her Iranian husband, Roksana Bahramitash, an Iranian-American professor of gender and Islamic studies, probes beneath the surface and suggests that the story is "presented in a sensational narrative that portrays Iran of the mid-1980s and Islam as essentially brutal, frightening, and exceptionally misogynist" ("The War on Terror" 227). Given the book's unprecedented popularity and its manner of representing Iran, one could argue that no single work of literature has ever tarnished the public image of Iran and the average Iranian on a global scale as Mahmoody's memoir (and its movie adaptation). The book, in other words, can be considered the classic Orientalist narrative of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, one that served as the pioneer of a generation of neo-Orientalist memoirs to emerge on Iran in the first decade of the new millennium, particularly post 9/11.

In the following sections, after discussing the books' reception, I will examine how Mahmoody's narrative operates within the well-established and fully-fledged framework of the tradition of American captivity narratives. I will then demonstrate how the foundation of this allegedly 'true account' of a white American woman and "her" daughter's alleged captivity and incarceration in Iran is constructed upon an overtly "manifest Orientalism" – as opposed to "latent Orientalism" – defined by Edward Said as "the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth" (*Orientalism* 206). This manifest Orientalism is characterized by the tropes of a colonial discourse that inform Mahmoody's representations of Iran. Against this backdrop, the picture of Iran that emerges is one of a land that seems to be irremediably primitive, misogynistic, fanatic, and contaminated.

## Reception

Not that it's inflammatory or anything, but "Not Without My Daughter" makes you want to set off for Iran with an atomic rolling pin. (Kempley)

Before engaging with a critical analysis of Mahmoody's work, it is important to establish the influence and the reach of the text (which partly serves to exemplify its "iconic" status) through its reception in the West. *Not Without My Daughter* has earned the title of "the most popular book ever published in the U.S. [and by extension in the West] about Iran" (Milani "On Women's Captivity" 43). Almost immediately, the book emerged as an international best-seller "on three continents" (Australia, North America, and Europe), was translated into more than twenty languages, and sold about 12 million copies (Mahmoody and Dunchock 245).<sup>4</sup> The book's sales record was unprecedented in the history of French nonfiction, as noted in the 1990 Guinness Book of Records, but "the greatest wave of all", according to Mahmoody herself, was in "Germany, where more than 4 million copies had been purchased and the book topped the bestseller list for more than two years" (Mahmoody and Dunchock 245). Selected as a Literary Guild alternate, *NWMD* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1987 (Milani "On Women's Captivity" 43), and finally, the book's extraordinary success inspired the publication of no less than 13 similar "true stories" between 1987 and 1998 (De Hart 51). On some of the most popular and widely-used online book databases (such as *We Read*, *goodreads*, *Google Books*, and *Amazon*), the book enjoys an average rating of almost 4 out of 5, and the number of reviewers and comments on the foregoing online platforms indicate the extent to which the book has been, and continues to be, read as an "authentic" story some three decades after its publication. In a similar vein, the critical reception of the book in popular media (such as newspapers and websites) remains predominantly panegyric, almost all putting the American 'heroine' on a pedestal and castigating the Iranian culture and Islam. Melani McAlister has observed that when the book first appeared in 1987, "it was reviewed positively and

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<sup>4</sup> There are no updated statistics on the books' sales figures and the statistics mentioned come from Mahmoody's second book, *For the Love of a Child*, published in 1992.

prominently in the major book publications; reviewers called it a ‘compelling drama’ and a ‘riveting inside look at everyday life in Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary paradise’” (162). In the almost total absence of academic critiques of the work<sup>5</sup> and the predominantly enthusiastic reviews of it, objection to Mahmoody’s work was voiced mainly from diasporic Iranian intellectuals or binational organizations that suffered the demonization of the Iranian/Muslim culture and intercultural relationships. Also, Iranian women, as well as women married to Iranian men, protested against the stereotypical and reductivist representations of Iran, Islam, and intermarriage (De Hart 53).

Mahmoody’s book also launched her meteoric career, earning her a place in national and international halls of fame. In her book, Mahmoody makes no secret of her utter disdain for her husband and literally anything reminiscent of Iran; notwithstanding, she has preserved her husband’s Iranian family name to this date. This paradoxical act of preservation is significant to the reception of Mahmoody and her book. On the one hand, it functions as an umbilical cord through which the author stays connected to and is remembered by her much-despised time in Iran. On the other, it is through the selfsame Iranian name that she is known around the world and can sustain her successful profile. The surname, therefore, operates as a double signifier, invoking at once both a feeling of xenophobia and infuriation at things Iranian (and by extension admiration for Betty’s ‘American’ bravery and defiance), as well as her international celebrity. At home, Mahmoody received the American Freedom Award in 1991 and was lionized by Oakland University in Michigan as “Outstanding Woman of the Year” (Mahmoody and Dunchock 246). Also, an honorary doctorate was conferred on her by her Michigan alma mater, Alma College. Internationally, she was eulogized as both the “Most Courageous Woman of the Year” and “Woman of the Year” in Germany for 1990. In 1992 *NWMD* won the Dutch readers’ prize for best book and a Dutch newspaper entitled Mahmoody “Mother of All Mothers” (De Hart 52). Among her many awards and honors, Mahmoody also takes pride in the fact that she was “asked to stand in for former British Prime Minister

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<sup>5</sup> Is it possible that the book’s genre might explain the lack of attention paid to it by scholars or literary critics, as one could argue that the book does not qualify as what would normally be considered ‘Literature’.

Margaret Thatcher”, in the same ceremony in which “she was chosen to receive the American Freedom Award in Provo, Utah for the July, 4, 1991, festival” (Mahmoody and Dunchock 246).

The publication of *NWMD* soon posited Mahmoody as a cognoscente on Iran, Islam, intercultural marriage, as well as international abduction cases. In no time, she appeared on the most popular American television talk shows and national and international radio programs, and started lecturing around the world about these issues. Her ‘expertise’ has also been employed in the U.S. political and judicial systems. In her second book, Mahmoody informs that she acts “as an ongoing consultant to the State Department on the subject”, has served as the chief investigator for legislation passed in Michigan relating to international kidnapping, and has appeared “as an expert witness” in divorce trials (254). Mahmoody is also the President and co-founder of “One World: For Children”, an organization designed, among other things (and the irony should not be lost) to promote intercultural understanding.

In 1992, Mahmoody, with a second ghost author, Arnold D. Dunchock, wrote *For the Love of a Child*, “part autobiographical sequel to her first book, part collection of stories (compilation) of other parents who have suffered the international abduction of their children, and part survey of the laws currently affecting these parents and children” (“For the Love of a Child (Review)”). Perhaps in response to the objections by Iranian-American and Muslim organizations to the misrepresentations in the book, Mahmoody reaffirms in her sequel that “My life with my husband and my daughter was exactly as I recount it in my book. I stand by my story in every detail” (268). Unsurprisingly, her second book falls within very similar thematic patterns and rhetoric of cultural stereotyping of different ‘foreigners’, reaffirming the moral superiority of Americans and concluding implicitly that intermarriage is a no-go zone.

In her second book, Mahmoody attributes the success of *Not Without My Daughter*, what made it a “worldwide phenomenon”, to “the universality of its subject: the bond between parent and child, and the extreme to which people will go when the bond is threatened” (245). She also maintains that the book’s cause célèbre owes much to its “concern for the ordinary”, its focus on the minute, everyday particularities of Iranian lives: “No matter what people’s

status, we all have an everyday home life and a natural interest in the routines of others" (245). Furthermore, she attributes the phenomenal success of her book to the fact that her story struck a ready chord with many fellow-sufferers. She observed that her story elicited responses from those who had suffered in silence and inspired them to step out of the dark and tell their own stories (247).

Even though Mahmoody tries to frame the appeal of her narrative in terms of the "universality" of its topic and its engagement with "the ordinary", one would be hard-pressed to acknowledge Mahmoody's reasons behind the success of her book. For one thing, a survey of the many reviews on the book reveals that it was never promoted as a story revolving around the natural bond between a mother and her daughter; nor does the book evince any "interest" in the ordinary daily lives of Iranian women. If anything, the narrative portrays those lives as mundane, pathetic, and miserable. One could argue that the major appeal of Mahmoody's story is rooted in its all-too-familiar plot: a white American Christian woman trapped in the land of the 'enemy'. Mahmoody's account appeals to her intended American audience by drawing on a long-established tradition of American captivity narratives with which many American readers were already familiar. This appeal is reinforced by the lingering memory of the Hostage Crisis, which was still fresh in the collective consciousness of the American public, thanks to its daily coverage in the U.S. media. Along the same lines, De Hart has explained the story's appeal also owes to the "ongoing ancient animosity of Christianity towards Islam" (53). Given the considerably greater success of the book in the predominantly Christian West, and the popularity of "the clash of civilization" rhetoric among the general Western public, De Hart's observation is warranted. As will be demonstrated in the captivity narrative section, there is a predominantly White, American Christian iconography at play in the text which engenders a bipolarity that persistently juxtaposes White American Christian ideals and values with their Iranian/Islamic counterparts, at once commending the former and denigrating the latter.



## Resurrecting the American Captivity Narrative

Stories of captivity and incarceration did not grow popular overnight, nor without good reason. In fact, the continued popularity and the wide readership of American captivity narratives are rooted in a variety of sociocultural, political, and historical dynamics. Far from developing in a vacuum, the tradition's genesis and development owed much to the deep-seated roots in the literary and political collective consciousness of the American public. *Not without My Daughter*, the modern day embodiment of such narratives, is deeply rooted in and draws extensively on two seemingly different, but closely interconnected, traditions. More specifically, it perfectly exemplifies that category of literary writing known as "hostage narratives", which, according to Brian T. Edwards, are "sensationalistic accounts in the mainstream press that ... reincorporate a period two centuries or more ago in the vocabulary and logic of the period" (340).

Classical captivity narratives were often stereotypical accounts of white people, predominantly women, ensnared by 'savage' foes. Be that as it may, the genre's malleability has allowed it to be employed circumstantially to align with the dominant zeitgeist of the time of production. Owing to their often amateur authorship, being expressions of some form of desperation, and their deep-seated roots in history, culture, and collective consciousness, captivity narratives have come to occupy a prominent place in American "low literature" (Colley 199). These narratives are part of a well-established literary genre, and particularly popular from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As such, the plots were often far from convoluted and mostly composed of a foreseeable concatenation of events, predominantly in the form of reversals and twists of fate. The thrust of such stories can usually be encapsulated in the white American woman being captured by Native Americans who snatch her away from a life of luxury and 'liberty' to become entrapped in the clutches of Indian savages. Whether the innocent captive walks into her solitary confinement unwittingly or is abducted against her will, she is made to suffer harrowing conditions and endure barbarous torments. No matter what tribulations she undergoes, the white captive eventually works her way out of the ordeal and is

rescued by a combination of her tenacity, bravery, and the grace of God. In the end, good always triumphs over evil and the victim returns home to tell the story of her survival, “all the more riveting for being true” (Milani "On Women's Captivity" 45).

For centuries, the predominant view of captivity narratives has been that of a rather monolithic genre, constructed upon certain well-established principles of diegesis and content. Richard Vanderbeets has defined captivity narratives as “a single genre” whose “fundamental informing and unifying principle” is a ritualistic journey through the archetypal separation, transformation, and return phases (549). However, as the genre gradually became a subject of academic scholarship and criticism, its perception as a unified literary tradition came into question. Tracing the development of captivity narratives across the past few centuries made it clear that the substantial corpus of captivity narratives could neither be encapsulated into a single genre, nor could it be considered as exclusively American.<sup>6</sup>

Analyzing the wide-ranging body of captivity narratives, Roy Harvey Pearce has divided them into three main genres. He has argued that despite their “natural basic unity of content”, captivity narratives have developed and changed course over the centuries and the genre has “shape[d] and reshape[d] itself according to varying cultural needs” (1). Penned mostly by early Puritan frontierspeople, the first and the greater share of captivity narratives were what Pearce calls “simple, direct religious documents” (2). They were comprised of a classic religious pattern of abduction (or “removal”), affliction, and redemption. Tapping into deeply-ingrained perceptions of history and Puritan ideological traditions, these narratives placed the familiar story of “providential deliverance” into the novel context of “the American Indian frontier” (Minter 337).

Captivity was no far-fetched concept to the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century American Christians. In fact, it was a well-established part of their religious credo to view the entire human existence as a pilgrimage through various imprisonments. From the “welbelov’d” *in utero* imprisonment,

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<sup>6</sup> In her analysis of captivity narratives as “low literature”, Linda Colley argues that captivity narratives were “exported to America, along with so much else, by 17<sup>th</sup> century English immigrants” and the insistence that such tales possess a “peculiar American quality” is rooted in “American exceptionalism” (201).

man is cast out into the “lower prisons” of this “fallen world” only to find his/her soul imprisoned within the confines of the flesh (Minter 338). Similarly, they envisioned heaven and hell in terms of their spatial physicality: the former was characterized by an open spaciousness, whereas the latter was described in carceral terms. In a similar fashion, they defined “the life of sin as a terrible enslavement and the life of faith in a fallen world as servitude, a ‘sweet captivitie to God’” (Minter 339).

In his *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier (1600-1860)* (1974), Richard Slotkin spells out the strong religious and ideological underpinnings of captivity narratives, where often the faithful white American was cast as a figure whose predicament and affliction served to caution and salvage the lives of other potential victims:

The ordeal is at once threatful of pain and evil and promising of ultimate salvation. Through the captive's proxy, the promise of a similar salvation could be offered to the faithful among the reading public, while the captive's torments remained to harrow the hearts of those not yet awakened to their fallen nature. (94)

Two doctrinal traditions underlie the first category of captivity narratives. Firstly, such narratives are steeped in the ideology of Providentialism: they chronicle the vicissitudes of the captives’ traumatizing ordeals and their eventual salvation by “the gracious providence of God” (Pearce 2). In such Puritan narratives, the captivity experience assumes symbolic significance. No matter how harrowing, what befalls the captors is part of a greater divine scheme and nothing but “evidences of God’s inscrutable wisdom” (2). As villainous as the Indians may be in such stories, they are merely God’s instruments, “actors in a divine drama” (Minter 337). Secondly, underwritten in these narratives is “a doctrine of afflictions that welcomed suffering and adversity by defining them as corrective, instructive, and profitable” (Minter 337). Both the captivity experience *in toto* and the specific chastisements the victims suffer signify the captive’s “elect” status: separation, captivity, and torment highlight the captive’s “chosenness” (Minter 337). The notion of “election” is originally mentioned in the Bible as “whom the lord loveth he chasteneth” (Hebrews 12.6), and internalized by certain Christian sects. This, in fact,

indicates another lineament in such early captivity narratives: the familiar Puritan medium of drawing on Biblical symbolism and allusions. Captivity narratives are “saturated in biblical language” (Colley 202) and such references function as a vicarious medium, connecting the individual’s journey and her destiny to that of a nation (Minter 342).

Linda Colley has demonstrated how the gradual transition from the Age of Faith to the Age of Enlightenment occasioned a decisive shift away from the spiritual roots of captivity narratives (202). Gradually, the straightforward, first-hand, and religious character of captivity narratives gave way to a novel development within the genre. The captives’ personal experiences were exploited for social purposes, and this made the shift toward propagandistic narratives dominant. One significant feature of these narratives is what Pearce has termed “stylization”: the concern with a verbatim recounting of the ordeal and faithfulness to its particularities begin to dissipate and writing the story by an external literary agent comes to find “a kind of journalistic premium” (3). Hence, first-hand personal experiences of devout Puritan captives are supplanted by “the writing of the hack and the journalist” (Pearce 6). However, even though the initial authors of such accounts were not men and women of letters, it would be naïve to assume that they were literary virgins, “bringing pure and unadulterated stories to a corrupting print market” (Colley 210). The captives’ own responses to their ordeal were also shaped by fictions to which they had been exposed. In propagandistic narratives, the experience turns into an instrument principally at the service of promoting both loathing and fear of the Other, with the intent of the typical writer being “to register as much hatred of the French and Indians as possible” (Pearce 6), not the workings of God’s all-encompassing providential design.

There is a ‘natural’ shift from the propagandistic tract to the third subgenre of captivity narratives: the “out-and-out sensational” (Pearce 3). Like propaganda narratives, the outright melodramatic narratives are penned mostly by authors other than those directly involved in and affected by the experience of captivity. The more captivity narratives steered away from the initial more ‘truthful’, direct, and personal accounts, the more they grew in “stylization”, and thus the latest category of captivity narratives is characterized by a “journalistic extremity

of language and style” (Pearce 9). From mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onward, it had become common practice to spice up the narratives and “stylize” them by interpolating as much fictional padding as possible to render them more journalistically worthwhile. Greater stylization in these later narratives indeed came at the cost of an almost total lack of concern for the principles of accuracy and authenticity, as the only thing their derivative authors were concerned with was the “salability of penny dreadful” (Pearce 9). These later generations of classic captivity narratives are notorious *mélanges* of fact and fiction. Even though, according to Pearce, many such narratives might be true in substance, they are “built up out of a mass of crude, sensationally presented details” (9). The greater share of such stories exist to illustrate Indian atrocities and their significance is mainly “vulgar, fictional, and pathological” (Pearce 9).

Eventually, in the latest subcategory of captivity narratives so much liberty was taken with the original stories that a great many of them evince little or no pretense at authenticity. By this time (mid- to late-18<sup>th</sup> century), the publication of such stories had become, more than anything, what Pearce has dubbed “an occasion for an exercise in blood and thunder and sensibility” (12). The predominance of pulp thriller captivity narratives and the almost totally absent concept of verisimilitude in such narratives led to a few authors appending a truth-swearing affidavit to the later editions of their stories (Pearce 12).

The progressive course of captivity narratives does not culminate with the sensational thriller. Captivity narratives, and especially the second and third subgenres, are characterized by the persistent interlacing of preexisting fiction and lived experience and are usually deemed to have some measure of substance, however infinitesimal that might be. This is one of the features that has problematized the study of captivity narratives through a single disciplinary lens – be it literature, history, ethnography, or politics – and exemplifies the “porous boundary between history and imaginative literature” (Colley 201). Out of the sensational shockers grew narratives that were published as genuine and truthful accounts, but were, in actuality, “out-and-out fakes” (Pearce 13). However, as Pearce has exemplified, the blood-and-thunder narratives had gone to such a wild extremity of language and content that they differed from the outright hoax narratives only “in the degree of their absurdity” (13). In short, the

transposition of one type of captivity narrative with another signified a progressive secularization. This secularization paved the way for propaganda and sensationalism, which, in turn, meant “increasing exploitation – increasing disregard for the particularities of the experience recounted as well as for the language of its appropriation” (Minter 347).

Captivity narratives have been described as “persistent, protean, profusely distributed over time and space and often downright plebeian” (Colley 200). Embedded in the archetypal captivity narratives, just like any other context-specific phenomenon, is a built-in obsolescence. Thus, to survive the restrictions of temporal and historical specificity, the genre has regenerated itself through variant adaptive stratagems and has reappeared in novel forms. Both as a mode of writing and thinking, the chameleon-like and resilient nature of captivity narratives enables them to be readapted and reshaped according to different cultural and political landscapes. With each new US adventure, new frontiers and foes followed, yet the classical topos remained largely unadulterated (Pearce 16).

It is within the framework of the preceding literary tradition and elasticity of appropriation that *NWMD* can be read as an archetypal latter-day captivity narrative, which comes to share the literary characteristics of its progenitors. Like many later classical captivity narratives, *NWMD* is a narrative wherein the three subgenres of captivity narratives converge. The narrative is informed by an undergirding religiosity in the sense that it draws on the Puritan ideas of punishment and salvation; it is a propagandistic tract in the sense that it promulgates popular and political propaganda about Iran, Islam, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War; and numerous exaggerations, myths, and disinformation qualify it as a highly sensationalized pulp thriller.

There is a religious underpinning and vocabulary at work in Mahmoody’s memoir that makes the perusal of the story as a religious captivity, or a purgation, narrative feasible. The first stage in this ‘pilgrimage’ is “removal”. Describing her “first remove”, Mary Rowlandson explains how she was taken away from “house and home and all our comforts within door and without” (10). In a similar vein, Betty, the white American Christian woman, unwittingly, or

arguably wittingly, flies from her “fallen world” of American luxury and privilege into the “trap” that would be her “cell” for the next eighteen months to come. She is held “captive” (42, 204, 94) both by her “tormentor” and the entire “backward” nation (55), and is forced to suffer the most extraordinary afflictions. Nevertheless, Betty does not weaken in her resolve in the face of adversity, constantly seeking help and redemption from God, and her staunch faithfulness along with her stamina come to fruition when at long last she manages to escape and tell her “true” story to other people.

It was customary for captive-writers, or later hack writers, to describe the place of their captivity as “hell”. In one of the earliest and best-known prototypical captivity narratives, Mrs. Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682),<sup>7</sup> the locale and the settings of captivity, along with the captors’ rituals, make the place “a lively resemblance of hell” (10). Similarly, the infernal imagery utilized in Mahmoody’s account highlights the religiosity of the experience. The summer heat is “hellish” (11), Betty’s ordeal is described as going through “hell” (322), and the country itself is often described as “hell” (64, 308, 22, 417).

Even though the afflictions that captives undergo in captivity narratives become more meaningful when placed in the framework of God’s omniscient providence, Betty’s torment seems to be caused also by her betrayal of her faith by marrying a Muslim, and perhaps her neglect of attending her Free Methodist Church (105). The ordeal, however, reunites Betty with her faith. In times of distress, her recourse is her regained religious faith, exemplified in her many prayers to God and her wish to read the Bible: “God was my only companion through the tedious days and nights. I spoke with Him constantly” (212). For early American Christians, despair was a grave sin, “born of failure of confidence of election” (Minter 340). In captivity narratives, the captives constantly oscillate between near despair and hope, but never completely surrender (Minter 340). The same pattern is evident in *NWMD*. Despite many moments of crushing “despair” (108, 168, 208, 217, 219, 289, 293, 359, 361), Betty always manages to find rays of hope in her faith and never acquiesces.

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<sup>7</sup> The full title is: *Mary Rowlandson, The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together With the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of ‘Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

Mahmoody makes it very clear that her predicament was also compounded by her religious faith; the fact that she was a non-Muslim “trapped” in a Muslim country. However, strengthened by her regained faith, she puts her trust in God’s judgment:

Moody centered much of his wrath upon the fact that I was not Moslem.

“You will burn in the fires of hell,” he screamed at me. “And I am going to heaven. Why do you not wake up?”

“I don't know what's going to happen,” I replied softly, trying to appease him. “I'm not a judge. Only God is a judge.” (230)

The text includes other occasions when Moody treats Betty harshly apparently for no other reason than being a Christian. When Betty, quoting a verse from the Holy Quran, declares that “Both of our families should help us with our problems”, Moody retorts: “Your family is not Muslim. They do not count” (58). Similarly, objecting to Moody keeping her away from her dying father, Moody replies:

Is your father Moslem, he asked sarcastically?

Not, of course not.

Then it does not matter, Moody said. He does not count. (144)

Nevertheless, Mahmoody’s descriptions of Islam as an exclusionist religion stand in stark contrast to Islam’s view of the people of other faiths, explicitly spelled out in different passages in the Quran:

Those who believe (in the Qur’an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabaeans – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (2:62)



In fact, not only does Islam not preach religious exclusionism, it forbids imposition of the faith on non-Muslims<sup>8</sup> and considers Christians “nearest in love” to Muslims (Cole).<sup>9</sup>

The preceding examples illustrate the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Muslims and Christians, or between the broader East and West, reinforced by Muslim ‘apathy’ towards non-Muslims, a fallacy that contradicts the most basic tenets of Islam. In fact, Islamic teachings are strongly averse to any form of discrimination against human beings. Islam’s insistence on deracialization and equality of people of all races, colors, and walks of life had threatened the very existence of the religion at its inception by the affluent ruling elite in a highly stratified Arab society where slavery, especially of the people of color, was common practice. Unsurprisingly, Mahmoody’s account makes no mention of the peaceful coexistence of such religious minorities as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians in Iran, which have always been part of the fabric of Iranian society for more than two millennia.<sup>10</sup>

The same religious underpinning and the sharp contrast created between Islam and Christianity figure prominently in the movie as well, which has also led to some reviewers’ reaffirming such religious binarism. One of the reviews, for instance, notes that “The film shows the true horrors and evils of Islam, from the denial of female sexuality in husband/wife relationships<sup>11</sup> to the fanatical religiosity which drives this people”, and continues to point out the significance of the movie for its intended Western Christian audience:

Sally Field, who plays Betty Mahmoody, gives a strong witness for Christ. In the film, the work of this believer stands the test of fire; and, for Christian viewers, it has the effect of building one's faith ... [I]t is shown through one woman's dynamic, personal

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<sup>8</sup> “There is no compulsion in religion. The right way has become distinct from error.” (2:256)

<sup>9</sup> “And you will find the nearest in love to Muslims those who say: ‘We are Christians’”. (5:82)

<sup>10</sup> It might also be noteworthy to point out that the mentioned religious minorities are all recognized in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran and are all represented in the Iranian Parliament. Also, it bears mentioning that despite the Western media’s representations of Iranians as anti-Semitic, Iran is home to the largest number of Jews in the Middle East.

<sup>11</sup> There is not even a hint of the mentioned “denial” either in the book or the movie, which renders the claim even more bizarre.

relationship with the Lord is she able to overcome her circumstances. This is, after all, what Christianity is all about. (Forbes)

Betty's deliverance is not different from that of traditional captivity narratives, either. In classical narratives, especially the earlier stories, the captives invariably attribute their redemption to God's "grace", "mercy", or "wisdom": "Mahtob and I pray[ed] our thanks to God for survival and renew[ed] our desperate pleas for deliverance" (239). In a similar vein, Mahmoody writes in her second book that "There is no explanation for what happened. I believed we were saved by the grace of God" (6). The idea of deliverance is fundamental to some captivity narratives and the double position of the captive-author as survivor-savior characterizes Mahmoody's narrative, too. In the following section, I will demonstrate how captivity narratives function as cautionary tales that are meant to be redemptive for Western readers.

### **Tales of Caution and the Mixed Marriage Menace**

*Not Without My Daughter* enjoys a significant cautionary underpinning of a rather didactic character, which is continued and elaborated at greater length in Mahmoody's second book. Readers are invited to exercise caution against the often "veiled threats" that the "primitive East" and the Other pose by virtue of all the 'menacing' attributes they possess. Like almost any principal leitmotif of such narratives, the cautionary element can also be traced to the American captivity narrative tradition. In this light, the (white, Western, Christian) readership's reception of *NWMD* and kindred narratives can be partly accounted for in terms of the cautionary and redemptive nature of these narratives.

Authors of captivity narratives (often white Western Puritan women) narrated their stories not only as a means of coming to terms with the indelible agonies and traumas they experienced, but, *a fortiori*, as a way of cautioning others too. They took it upon themselves to awaken and to enlighten the readers. This role is both socially and religiously significant and is both assumed by the authors for themselves as dutiful, devout Christians, and is also conferred upon them by their audience by virtue of the position of authority and authenticity they come

to establish through the narration and reception of their stories. Thus, in her epistolary captivity novel, *The History of Maria Kittle* (1779), Ann Eliza Bleecker declares her intention in writing her story as opening “the sluice gates of her readers’ eyes” (Pearce 14), an expression which conflates the benevolent intention of the author in awakening her readers with the extent of horror to be exposed in the story.

Classical captivity narratives spoke to two potential spiritual dangers simultaneously: the danger of hubris and self-contentment bred by the awareness of one’s elect status, and that of disconcertion and despair brought about by the “failure of confidence of election” (Minter 339). Remaining vigilant and unbeleaguered by these dangers necessitated that good Puritans retain an “imperfect assurance” and remain in a constant in-betweenness. This prompted a dual necessity: the need to familiarize oneself with “the noble operations of the blessed Spirit” against which they could judge their own experiences, and the need to produce one’s own account, to narrate one’s own spiritual journey as a sign that “one’s own name, too, was listed among the elect” (Minter 339). As Minter maintains, embedded in the very act of writing is “the conviction ... that it can enter their ongoing struggles with salvation” (341). The acts of reading, hearing about, and writing such narratives are made extensions of that “imperfect certainty”, junctures in the eternal drama of salvation, which for Puritans held no promise of a closure before death. It is noteworthy that the legacy of this Puritan worldview has somehow been translated into political action, and is manifest in the United States’ track record of enemy-fabrication as well as the construction of the U.S. as a nation constantly under attack by “foreigners”, a drama which, just like that of salvation, appears to have no end in view.

The act of writing also highlights the figure of the American heroine-writer as a Christ-like figure whose suffering is meant to be redemptive for the readers, a role that, according to her second book, Mahmoody assumes by attempting to “save” other American women in undergoing similar circumstances. This redemption, however, cannot happen if the story remains untold. It is through verbalizing the experience and conveying the message to the audience that the author-ex-captive, can both reflect on her ordeal and learn from it in retrospect, and simultaneously caution and inform her readers. In a strikingly similar vein,

authors of more recent strains of captivity narratives have sought solace in the act of writing as a way of surmounting their past predicaments. In her second book, Mahmoody writes of the therapeutic effect of composing her story: “I was angry when I wrote the book. It was like therapy for me” (12).

Nevertheless, captivity authors have also taken it upon themselves to warn their readers against venturing across the normative racial, cultural, and religious frontiers, especially when mixed-marriages are concerned. Modern captivity narratives of the last few decades, as Ware has observed, are marked with a growing obsession with the intermarriage of Western *women*, dominated by a discourse revolving around the ‘menace’ intrinsic to cross-cultural romances, which are bound to culminate in a doomed cul-de-sac (62). Embedded in the intercultural marriage is an alarming sense of foreboding that is bound to materialize when the captivity, or whatever other tragedy awaits the Western woman, at long last transpires. Such marriages are depicted not only as endangering Western women themselves; rather, by extension, they put the entire Western society to which they belong at risk. By virtue of their sexuality, Western women function as gateways to the Western world and therefore their marriages to non-Westerners are deemed as posing a threat to the idea of the Western civilization. Consequently, Western women who transgress the bounds of the “colour line of love” are deemed as compromising Western nation-states. The authors’ ‘mistake’ should make their audiences wary of mixed marriages and therefore dissuade them from treading the ‘wrong’ path. In this light, the authors are cast as “cultural reproducers of the West”, empowered through their experience to pass judgment on the propriety of social behavior and to “exert control over other women who are constructed as deviants” (Yuval-Davis 37). Finally, it is worth mentioning that the freedom of choice manifested in the possibility of committing the “mistake” of intermarriage is, in fact, what distinguishes the involuntary captivity of the white Western woman in classical accounts from the relatively conscious transgression of later “learned Foolhardies” (Ware 62).

Even though a religious underpinning does inform Mahmoody’s narrative, the propagandistic and sensational aspects of the text take precedence. Not only is the account

itself ridden with propaganda of all sorts against Iran, its religion, culture, and political system, the instant celebrity it yielded provided Mahmoody with numerous platforms to continue disseminating such propaganda against Islam and Iran. This propagandization is carried out, among other things, by perpetuation of various myths, many of which have grown to become so popular as to recur in many later neo-Orientalist writings on Iran. One such myth, for instance, is the existence of an apparently summary capital punishment in Iran. In Mahmoody's Iran, it seems, all crimes and offences, no matter how minor, are punishable by execution.<sup>12</sup> Repeatedly, Mahmoody claims that birth control is illegal in Iran and women can be put to death by merely using contraception of any kind (256). The IUD she carries within herself, is assigned the significance of a death warrant: "Suddenly, there in my hand was the bit of plastic and copper that could condemn me to death" (231).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in a country where she claims one can be "sentenced to six years in prison" for "thinking against the government" (314) – a claim that simply defies reason – it should come as no surprise if someone were executed for using contraception, or fleeing across the border illegally.

Another myth popularized through the book is the abduction of underage boys for military service on the war front. Mahmoody quotes a friend of hers that

When they [the revolutionary guards] see a group of boys, they pick them up and take them to the war... They do this at school, too. Sometimes they take a truck to a boy's school and take away the boys to be soldiers. Their families never see them again. (161)

Despite Mahmoody's claim, the defense against the 1980 Iraqi-imposed war was so popularly supported throughout that hundreds of thousands of volunteers constituted the majority of Iranian forces, as in the aftermath of the Revolution, the Iranian army was still fledgling (Dugdale-Pointon).

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<sup>12</sup> On the book's title page, Mahmoody declares that "This is a true story. The characters are authentic, the events are real. But the names and identifying details of certain individuals have been disguised in order to protect them and their families against the possibility of arrest and execution by the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran".

<sup>13</sup> The fact of the matter, however, is that even though contraception has been at times religiously controversial in the past, it has never been illegal and despite capital punishment being legal in Iran, it is reserved only for such major felonies as murder, rape, and heavy drug trafficking.

One other fiction that Mahmoody draws heavily upon and is also regurgitated in other neo-Orientalist texts is the myth of raping virgin girls before execution. Betty thus summarizes the myth: “Inevitably they [the revolutionary guards] raped their women victims – young girls too – before they killed them. I shuddered as I remembered their horrid saying: ‘A woman should not die a virgin’” (394), a claim that also appears in other passages in the book (294). However, as Marandi and Pirnajmuddin have demonstrated, such systematic acts of rape have never occurred, as the philosophy behind them is simply non-existent (35). Quite the contrary, rape itself is a first-degree felony in Iran and the rapist can be sentenced to capital punishment.

There are more than a few such myths, blunders, and contradictions in Mahmoody’s account. Colley has interpreted such untruths as a sign of lack of authenticity in such narratives and has concluded that “narratives which draw on an individual’s genuine exposure to captivity rarely make this kind of mistake” (206).<sup>14</sup>

Characteristically, captivity narratives stemmed from some sort of reality and were worked up in various ways into something horrific and absurd (Pearce 16). Quite similar to these classical sensational narratives, *NWMD* is fraught with overtly sensational details and somehow epitomizes Pearce’s “noisomely visceral thriller” category (1). Pearce maintains that many such narratives are informed by an “American Gothicism”. Such works “delight in gruesomeness” and the authors capitalize on “the luxury of sorrow”, “the luxury of horror” and “all that such narratives had come to mean for American readers – a meaning which rose out of emphasis on physical terror, suffering and sensationalism” (15). The following passage is only one among numerous instances in *NWMD*, which exemplifies the emphasis on gruesomeness, horror, pain, and sensationalism:

Moody grabbed me, threw me to the floor, and pounced upon me. He seized my head in his hands and banged it repeatedly against the floor ... Moody bit into my arm deeply,

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<sup>14</sup> There are numerous other instances of inaccuracy, overexaggeration, and downright fabrication, a detailed discussion of which is simply beyond the scope of this study. However, one can refer to such instances as erroneous information on Iranian divorce laws (134), exaggeration of the population of Tehran at the time (26, 67, 154, 248), the non-existent concept of “Islamic cooking” (52), false information about Shiite customs and practices (38, 60, 67, 234, 281) and myriad other exaggerations and fabrications (107, 109, 163, 253, 312, 385).

drawing blood. I screamed, wriggled free from his grasp, and managed to kick him in the side. But this produced anger more than pain. He grabbed me with his two mighty arms and threw me to the hard floor. I landed on my spine and felt pains shoot the entire length of my body. Now I could barely move. For many minutes he stood over me cursing violently, kicking at me, bending over to slap me. He yanked me across the floor by pulling at my hair. Tufts came loose in his hand. (200)

The second reservoir of tropes that *NWMD* taps into is American political collective consciousness. *Not Without My Daughter* remains the prototype of “hostage narratives”, rehashing the all-too-familiar stereotype of the white woman entrapped in the Orient. Politically, the narrative can be traced back to what is commonly known as the Hostage Crisis in the West. Less than a year after the Islamic Revolution, on the fourth of November 1979, a group of revolutionary university students took some 50-odd Americans hostage from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, apparently in reaction to the presence of the deposed shah in the United States and in exchange for his extradition. On another level, the hostage taking was the outward expression of a profound and longstanding Iranian apprehension: that just like the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup d’état that removed Iran’s first democratically elected Prime Minister, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, and reinstated the Shah, the U.S. would organize another putsch and squelch the fledgling Revolution at its inception. By dint of this political crisis, “an indelible sense of anguish etched itself into the collective memory of a justifiably outraged nation” (Milani “On Women’s Captivity in the Islamic World” 42) and all relations between the two countries were severed. Also in the realm of media and literature, hostage taking was made the most recurrent leitmotif in all Iran-related broadcasts as well as works of literature and cinema of the time.<sup>15</sup> The representation and reception of the crisis in the U.S. owed greatly to the tradition of American captivity narratives. As Melani McAlister has argued, “the discourse of terrorist threat formed in the context of the Iran hostage crisis depended on the

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<sup>15</sup> Kinzer reports that In the United States, “the television news program ‘Nightline’ emerged to give nightly updates on the crisis, with anchorman Ted Koppel beginning each report by announcing that it was now ‘Day 53’ or ‘Day 318’ of the crisis” (Kinzer).

underlying structure of a captivity narrative – those stories of whites taken by Indians that had dominated the literature of early America” (199).

The Hostage Crisis remains paramount in understanding the complexities of the strained Iran-U.S. relationship and is essential in analyzing representations of Iran and the global popular/public view of Iran. One could argue that the incident has become as deeply ingrained in the American collective political consciousness as the 1953 CIA-engineered coup is in the Iranians’ minds. Stephen Kinzer, an American author who has thoroughly researched and written on the history of Iran-U.S. history, especially the coup d’état in question, contends that “To this day we are still living under the emotional overhang of the hostage crisis of 1979” (Kinzer).<sup>16</sup> He further contends that Americans are still “caught in this emotional prison” and explains how the humiliating memory of the coup has remained with the Iranians as well.<sup>17</sup>

As a fully-fledged narrative of captivity/hostage-taking, *NWMD* operates at two parallel levels: at one level it recounts the story of the white American woman trapped in “hell”. Expressions of this mode of entrapment start on the front cover of almost all versions of the book and continue on its back cover. The publisher’s blurb on one edition urges the reader “imagine yourself alone and vulnerable. Imagine yourself ... trapped by a husband you thought you trusted, and held prisoner in his native Iran, a land where women have no rights and Americans are despised”. In a short declaration, the blurb achieves much: it establishes the image of the white American woman as innocent, vulnerable, and betrayed; it portrays the Other as menacing and untrustworthy; it draws on the patriotic sentiments of American reader

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<sup>16</sup> Here is how Kinzer exemplifies the living memory of the crisis in one of his speeches on U.S. intervention in Iran:

We just met a member of the congress today who said that I approached someone on the floor of the House to ask him if he would support a resolution for negotiating with Iran, and he looked at me and said: “No, they took over our embassy and seized our diplomats”. (Kinzer)

<sup>17</sup> In so doing, he refers to recollection of an episode by Bruce Laingen, a career diplomat who was chief of the U.S. Embassy staff, and the highest-ranking hostage:

One day, after Laingen had spent more than a year as a hostage, one of his captors visited him in his solitary cell. Laingen exploded in rage, shouting at his jailer that this hostage-taking was immoral, illegal and ‘totally wrong.’ The jailer waited for him to finish, then replied without sympathy. ‘You have nothing to complain about,’ he told Laingen. ‘The United States took our whole country hostage in 1953’. (Kinzer)



by telling them of another country's hatred toward them and earning their hatred back; and finally it reiterates the clichéd image of the oppressed Muslim woman, deprived of all her rights.

The back cover of another edition reads: "Mother and daughter became prisoners of an alien culture, hostages of an increasingly tyrannical and violent man". As demonstrated above, the choice of the word hostage, and its synonyms, which are reiterated throughout the book (42, 54, 56, 61, 69, 119, 48, 91, 204, 23, 24, 26, 94, 324, 419) is anything but coincidental. They are, quite the contrary, *mots justes* chosen with careful calculation to take the reader only a few years back to the Hostage Crisis and to catalyze emotional engagement with the melodrama. Mahmoody expresses her state of captivity in an early soliloquy: "Was this real? Were Mahtob and I prisoners? Hostages? Captives of the venomous stranger who had once been a loving husband and father?"(42). Elsewhere, she ponders that if she leaves Iran without her daughter, "Mahtob would be trapped in this crazy country with her insane father" (191).

Betty's captivity and entrapment happens on two planes. On a domestic scale, Betty is imprisoned in her sister-in-law's, Essey's, and later her own home respectively, either because, according to her, she has done something that has incurred her husband's wrath or for no particular reason at all. While her husband leaves the house or goes to hospital to work:

[The window] was unlocked, sliding open to my touch. I poked my head through and gauged the possibilities. I could scramble through this window easily enough and reach the landing, but I would still be held captive by the heavy iron street door, which was always locked. (204)

It looks as if she is entirely cut off from the outside world and even if she attempted to break away from the confines of her prison, the "dutiful Islamic spies" (126) would tell on her. All the places she lives in are described in the pages of the book in carceral terms and her sister-in-law and her family, along with Essey, Nassrine, and her own husband are described as her captors, kidnappers, jailers, and hostage-takers (56, 72, 81, 117, 25).

On a larger plane yet the entire city of Tehran mutates into a metropolitan prison, circumscribed by the mountain ranges that serve as the prison's towering walls:

The countryside was beautiful, to be sure, but the beauty was the result of gargantuan mountain ranges rising higher and standing out in sharper relief than the Rockies of the western United States. They ringed Tehran on all sides, turning the entire city into a trap. (167)

Mahmoody's description of the mountains surrounding Tehran resonates with the Puritan view of the nature as "sinister captivity" and the "vast, desolate howling wilderness ... as most formidably the devil's own" (Minter 345). Even when she is out of her prison-home, she is trapped in the confines of the city. It is not only her husband-captor or his relatives whom she views as her prison guards; the city's entire populace plays the paradoxical double role of her captors and inmates.

On a yet more macroscopic level, the country in its entirety transmutes into a massive prison-nation from which Betty strives to escape. Even when she is out of her prison-home, and away from the prison-capital, she is still behind the greater bars of Iran. This hostage imagery pervades the entire text. In one notable instance, Betty describes her "entrapment" in "a country that, to me, had seemed populated almost totally with villains" (334). Once again, Mahmoody's insistence on being "entrapped" in a society of "villains" is underpinned by Puritanical parameters that viewed the society as a "lesser prison of this lower world, but also as man's proper home, as scene of saintly pilgrimage" (Minter 345).

The second parallel that underlies *NWMD* is when it dawns on Betty, as if in a flash of epiphany, that she is not a lone sufferer in her predicament. In fact, she discovers that all Iranian women are her fellow-sufferers. Betty shares the harrowing experience of her captivity with her cellmates, all Iranian women, whom she also often depicts as her captors and jailors. Betty reflects, "Now I realized anew that these women were caught in a trap just as surely as I, subject to the rules of a man's world, disgruntled but obedient" (118). In another passage, when negotiating her escape with a liaison to smugglers and pondering the "professional

network” of human smugglers and the history and reasons behind its development, she concludes: “I was not the only one trapped in Iran. If life here was intolerable for me, surely there were millions of people all around me who shared the same sentiments” (175). Nevertheless, even in finding fellow-sufferers in Iranian women, she casts herself as totally distinct from her ‘cellmates’. While she actively resists and challenges the system in which she finds herself captive, Iranian women are not only merely acquiescent to it, but through their ‘silence’ they reinforce and legitimize it as well.

What is significant in analyzing the depiction of the Iranian women’s both literal and figurative incarceration, is the fact that their ‘imprisonment’, both on the domestic and broader scales, transpires in a more holistic and ideological framework. In Mahmoody’s eyes, lying at the root of the Iranian woman’s physical, spiritual, domestic, and existential incarceration is the same rationale that justifies the ‘barbarous’ Iranian/Muslim man’s cruelty and the government’s fanaticism. The culprit is none other than the now-all-too-familiar root of all evils: Islam.

According to Betty, before being imprisoned in her house or country, the Muslim woman is shackled by her immobilizing faith, “locked up inside her mandatory veil—a mobile prison shrunk to the size of her body” (Milani “On Women's Captivity” 40). In a variety of its different forms and synonyms,<sup>18</sup> the trope of the veil resurfaces in almost every page of the story. This omnipresence, however, is anything but merely descriptive. The veil, and especially the chador, is exploited to the fullest to reiterate and reinforce the idea of the invisibility of the Muslim Iranian women and portray them as suppressed by their restrictive faith, “cloaked in the omnipresent heavy black chador” (9). Invited to a family gathering, Betty cannot but notice how all around her “hovered insolent, superior-looking men” while “women wrapped in chadors sat in quiet subservience” (34).

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<sup>18</sup> These forms include *hejab* (the generic term used for both any kind of head covering and for dressing modestly in general), *chador* (an optional full-length robe-like garment worn by some Muslim women, especially in Iran), *roosarie* (the Persian word for headscarf), and *manteau* (a full-length or half-length coat) all in “drab” colors (11).

Interestingly, even the definition Betty gives of the chador is erroneous and misleading: "A chador is a large, half-moon-shaped cloth entwined around the shoulders, forehead, and chin to reveal only eyes, nose, and mouth" (5). In reality, however, the chador neither "cover[s] the forehead and chin", nor is it supposed to, nor is it meant to "reveal only eyes, nose, and mouth." The definition of the chador, only one of the common forms of hejab in Muslim countries, seems purposely distorted to reinforce the alleged oppression, invisibility, and incarceration of Iranian Muslim women. Betty adds that "the effect [of the chador] is reminiscent of a nun's habit in times past" (5), thus invoking the Orientalist trope of the backwardness and medievalism of Muslim cultures and representing the chador as anachronistic and Iran as a country frozen in a dark primitive past. The chador-clad women are not only "backward" by virtue of their "antiquated and even unhealthy dress code" (35), their manners and bearing as well as their physical appearances are all the more uncouth and uncivilized. Upon his arrival in Tehran, Moody is "engulfed" by "a mob of robed veiled humanity that clawed at his business suit and wailed in ecstasy" (9). Once again, one can see the image of a "mob", the denial of identity and individuality, and the bestialization of the Other all in one picture. Wondering why she is wearing "this stupid scarf" (9), Betty worries that she "must smell like the rest of them by now" (9). The chador seems to be the culprit for all that she deems wrong with the "veiled mob", from their countenance and their "stench" to their manners. Betty does not want her 'American' daughter to be raised in a country where not only women's "beauty", but their "spirit" and "soul" is "cloaked". She does not want her daughter to become "one of them" (103). As Spurr has pointed out,

The fear of contamination that begins by the biological thus expands, through a scale of progression that moves both metaphorically and metonymically, into anxiety over psychological perils of going native and finally into the dystopian view of vast social movements that threaten civilization itself. (91)

Mahmoody does not make any efforts to conceal her disdain and abhorrence for the chador. Not only does she loathe the garment, she also expresses her strong aversion and disgust for the Iranian women who wear it. Musing upon the education system in Iran and concluding that

the system is designed so as to produce subservient women, she reveals her feelings for Iranians, in particular, women, saying that she “hated the sight of all Iranians, especially meek women in chadors” (115), thus legitimizing it for her Western reader to hate anyone who looks different.

Therefore, one can conclude that it is not only the physical space of the house, the city, or the country that binds Iranian women, nor is it merely the presence of their tyrannical husband or any other “superior-looking” (34) male. According to Mahmoody, it is the observance of religious faith that restrains their very existence.<sup>19</sup> In this light, the chador, Mahmoody’s much-loathed reminder of the “cloaked” Iranian woman, is anything but a symbol of religious observance. It transmogrifies, in Betty’s phantasmagoric world, into shackles chained to the Iranian woman’s body, and as she claims, her soul, too. In her second book, Mahmoody explains her reaction to shedding her “hated chador, the black fabric designed to cloak Iranian women from head to toe” (17). According to her, not only is this imprisonment the fate of the Iranian woman, anyone who sets foot on the turf of Iran is also bound to suffer the same lot. When Ellen, Betty’s American friend who has converted to Islam, tells her on the phone that she thinks Betty should tell Moody about her plan “out of her love for me and concern for my welfare and that of my daughter” (182), she hangs up the phone, “feeling an Islamic noose around her neck” (183). Therefore, it seems as if the ‘fate’ of Iranian women is not exclusive to them. Like a contagious disease, if one lives among them – for no matter how short a period of time – one is bound to be cloaked, abused, beaten, and “noosed”.

Thus, according to Mahmoody, no matter where the Muslim woman stands in the world, regardless of what country she resides in or what she does, as long as she is loyal to the observance of her religion, she remains eternally subjugated, dominated, harnessed, and cooped up. Even though Mahmoody sees Islam as the root of the plight of Iranian women, and the nation, her (and her ghost writer’s) grasp of the religion and her understanding of the Islamic history and tradition are minimal.

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<sup>19</sup> Given that Betty, too, is restrained by her own faith in a neo-Orientalist ideology, one could argue that she is “trapped” in more than one way as she might at first seem.

## Ghost Authors

One of the significant components often neglected or underestimated in analyses of both classical and modern captivity narratives is the role of the co-authors, or ghosts, in the process of narrative selection and composition. Like much else about captivity narratives, the role of ghost authors in the construction of such narratives is anything but a novelty. As early as the early 18th century, narratives of a more journalistic and propagandistic character were written in more acceptably 'literary' styles, somehow inflecting from the didacticism of the narratives of God's Providence and devout religiosity to the natives' savagery. These narratives were either primarily produced or ghostwritten by the hack and the journalist to enhance the conventional stylistic features of the narrative (hence the term "stylization") and make the story more compelling and, consequently, more easily marketable.

In this light, the role of the ghost author in Mahmoody's narrative bears noting. William Hoffer, who co-authored the book with Mahmoody, has been described as an author who "has been spinning out international bestsellers for more than 20 years" ("William Hoffer"). In his track record, Hoffer has such works as *Midnight Express* (1977), which could be considered the most recent predecessor of *NWMD*. Unsurprisingly, *Midnight Express* is another tale of incarceration, only this time with a young white American man as the protagonist, in what the book blurbs describe as yet another "environment of hellish squalor: Turkey. Except for the transformation of the fabled Turkish harems into a hideous dungeon where torture, rape, and murder prevail, there is nothing in *Midnight Express* that is not typical of the brand of Orientalism applied to Turkey. Carol Stocker argues that the book-cum-movie is only another tale that "depict[s] the Middle East as a malignant nightmare" (Stocker).<sup>20</sup> The following lines from the filmic adaptation of the book, uttered by Billy, the American protagonist, to the Turkish judge in court, neatly summarize the dominating attitude of the story: "For a nation of

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<sup>20</sup> Zaim Dervis and Aslihan Tokgöz have also elaborated, in their analyses of representations of Turkishness, how William Hoffer's book and the subsequent film engage in the crudest form of Orientalist essentialization and Othering of things Turkish (Tokgöz; Dervis).

pigs, it sure is funny you don't eat them. Jesus Christ forgave the bastards. But I can't. I hate them. I hate you, I hate your nation and I hate your people".<sup>21</sup>

It should come as no surprise that a few years later *NWMD* resonated with strikingly similar passages and depictions of the Muslim Iranian Other. In *For the Love of a Child*, Mahmoody recounts how she came to choose Hoffer as her collaborator:

While in Tehran, I had heard about street demonstrations against *Midnight Express*, though the book and the movie based on it were banned there. I wanted to write with a person who had had such a profound effect on ordinary people in Iran — the people who had had such total control over my own life.... If this writer could move the Iranian fundamentalists so strongly in absentia, I thought, he must be very effective. (21)

William Hoffer was, in a sense, "very effective". As a popular American author of melodramatic stories, he knew the marketing logistics as well as the political zeitgeist of the time that had largely shaped the popular taste of the 80s and 90s U.S. too well. Even though *NWMD* fails to live up to standard literary conventions of narrative composition and stops at the level of the sensational and the propagandistic, Hoffer has "stylized" the raw story and the book does owe its success a great deal to Hoffer's contribution. Also, as far as offending the religious and national sensibilities of "fundamentalist" Iranians is concerned, Mahmoody and Hoffer seem to have achieved that, since, as Bahramitash has observed, the book "helped to incite racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Iranian feelings across Europe and North America" ("The War on Terror" 227).

### **West Meets East: Clash of Civilization and Un-Civilization**

East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.  
(Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*)

Mahmoody takes every opportunity to draw on the Iranian government's and nation's airing of their grievances towards the U.S. government's antagonistic policies against the Islamic

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<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly, the film won two Oscars and six Golden Globes (Mutlu 475).

Republic of Iran. It is no secret that the 80s were troubled times of escalating friction between Iran and the United States. The tension had officially commenced and come to the fore almost from the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran in 1979. With the collapse of American leverage and hegemony in a post-revolution Iran, American influence and interference were anything but welcome.

In order, however, to make sense of the anti-U.S. government sentiments in Iran of the 80s – the stress on the word *government* is legitimate<sup>22</sup> – the story has to be analyzed against the backdrop in which it has transpired. At the time span of the events in the book – August 1984 to February 1986 – tension was particularly exacerbated between the two countries. The official United States' presence had formally ceased to exist in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran by revolutionary university students. Lured by the United States into attacking Iran (Paul), Iraq imposed an all-out war against Iran and invaded parts of the country, leaving hundreds of thousands of people dead and entire cities annihilated. There is now a plethora of irrefutable evidence that the United States' did not stop merely at seducing Iraq into the catastrophic war with Iran, one that earned the title of the longest war of the century (Hiro). It also aided and abetted Iraq, supplying then-president Saddam Hussein with the battlefield intelligence, chemical weapons, and poison gas that he used against Iranian soldiers and civilians as well as civilian Kurds of his own country. These facts have been articulated by many prominent American political figures including Congressman Ron Paul (Paul), Noam Chomsky (Chomsky "Rogue States"), and Stephen Kinzer (Goodman).<sup>23</sup>

It was in the midst of such extremely strained relations that Betty Mahmoody set foot in Iran. There are many passages in the book (and episodes in the film) that depict the bombing

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<sup>22</sup> A 2008 World Public Opinion poll on "Trends in Attitudes toward the United States, Americans, and Relations between Islam and the West" revealed that there is a substantial difference in Iranian people's attitudes towards the U.S. government and their attitude towards the American people ("Public Opinion in Iran").

<sup>23</sup> Ironically, of course, high on the George W. Bush administration's dossier of justifications for launching a war against Iraq in 2003 were Saddam Hussein's alleged stockpiling of chemical weapons, and nuclear and biological programs, which turned out to be fictitious and non-existent (Ross).



raids on civilians and the havoc wrought on the capital city of Tehran as well as other cities (154, 55, 58, 59, 61, 241, 307, 76 ). Mahmoody never acknowledges in her account, and in fact insistently denies, the fact that the air raids had anything to do with the United States. Instead, she tries to depict an Iran where people fanatically despise Americans apparently for no good reason except their inherent zealotry bred by the fact that they are “Shiite Moslems, still glorying in the success of their revolution, clad in the self-righteous robes of fanaticism”(58).

The anti-U.S. sentiment Mahmoody constantly mentions is nowhere better crystallized than in the character of her American-turned-Iranian husband. When the Hostage Crisis erupts, Mahmoody tells us that Moody does not conceal his “elation” over the incident, “clearly gleeful that America was emasculated before the world” (223). Elsewhere, claiming to having been ferociously beaten by Moody, Betty reports that Moody threatened to kill her “with a big knife”:

I am going to cut you up in pieces. I am going to send your nose and your ear back to your folks. They will never see you again, I will send them the ashes of a burned American flag along with your casket. (188)

Read against the historical backdrop mentioned above, such statements strike a ready chord with the American audience at a time when the traumatizing memory of the Hostage Crisis was still fresh in their minds and tensions between the two countries were running particularly high. In fact, such depictions tapped into the “New Patriotism” of the 1980s (Hoberman 320), which inspired many American cultural productions of the period. The trope was especially popular in the Hollywood industry of the time, which, as James Hoberman contends, was characterized by a “mad cacophony of patriotic symbols” (271). Deborah Cunningham Walker has demonstrated that such productions, including the book, “unabashedly affirm traditional American social values and institutions and negate all things ‘un-American’” (30). In the same light, Andrew Busch writes that according to Martin E. Marty, there is “too intimate a connection between the new patriotism and attitudes of superiority, egotism, and militarism” (54). This patriotic symbolism also permeates Mahmoody’s second book, *For the Love of a Child*, with many

'patriotic' references to the Stars and Stripes. Taking 'refuge' in the American Embassy in Ankara, Betty finds herself "just where I wanted to be, safe in the shadow of our flag" (5). As she flies into New York, she notices "the Statue of Liberty had never looked so beautiful. There she stood proudly and I had a new appreciation for what she symbolized" (15).

On the Fourth of July, Bill's [William Hoffer, the co-author of *NWMD*] wife and son joined us to celebrate the holiday. Bill held Mahtob up to hang the American flag, ever so proudly, on the pole to the side of our house. Mahtob was one patriotic six-year-old who truly understood the meaning of freedom. (23)

Mahmoody reveals, however, that the Iranian people's anti-American sentiments, even though strong, are far from genuine: "Although Moody's countrymen officially hate Americans, they venerate the American educational system" (3). Furthermore, she informs us that despite their "hatred" of the West, there are "many Iranians who retain an appreciation of the western style of life and who bristle at the present government's official contempt for America" (106). In fact, by way of de-contextualizing the anti-U.S. government sentiments of the time and failing to differentiate between both the American and Iranian people and their governments, Mahmoody misinforms her readers, while simultaneously justifying her own enmity toward Iranians as well as preaching hatred and difference.

In his discussion of the scope of Orientalism, Edward Said shows how Harold W. Glidden's assertion that, on the Western and Oriental scale of values "the relative position of elements is quite different", epitomizes what he calls the "Orientalist confidence" (*Orientalism* 49). Said then goes on to argue how, within the dominant Orientalist discourse, what constitutes an Oriental is different from that of a Westerner in essence:

No merely asserted generality is denied the dignity of truth; no theoretical list of Oriental attributes is without application to the behavior of Orientals in the real world. On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things. (49)

Within this paradigm, Mahmoody paints an Iran that seems to be intrinsically and systematically 'different' from her country. This difference, far from being innocent or natural, is heavily charged and culminates in what Said has designated as "the essence of Orientalism: the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (*Orientalism* 42).

In her depiction of Iran and its constant juxtaposition with the United States, Mahmoody exploits every possible means at her disposal to denigrate Iran. She taps into Western, and particularly American, collective political, religious, social, and even racial distinctions to exemplify how anything Iranian is not only radically different from but also averse to its American counterpart. What is more, such differences across cultural and religious frontiers are not explored, engaged with, related to, or comprehended. By dint of the Iranian people's alleged inferiority, such differences should make every Westerner wary of engaging with Iranians and, by extension all Muslims, while appreciating the absolute superiority of their own culture. The narrative's capitalization upon the extremely tense relationship between Iran and the United States in the 1980s seems primarily intended to reinforce the idea that the Iranian people are resentful of Americans. By contrast, this homogenizing attitude seems mostly absent in other protagonists in Mahmoody's second book. In *For the Love of a Child* (1992), we hear from one of the female American 'heroines' who had spent some time in Iraq, that "They [the Iraqis] made a big distinction between the U.S. government and the American people. They had no stereotypical American in mind – and they wanted to convince me that the Iraqi people are not our enemies" (192).

No such distinctions modify Mahmoody's stereotypes. At one point in her book, she literally defines herself as the "enemy" of Iranian people when she wonders: "Do the Kurds hate Americans, too? Or are we allies, common enemies of the Shiite majority?" (388). This annunciation is more than Mahmoody simply venting her indignation at Iranians. If contextualized and placed into a historico-political framework, it can be translated into a corollary of the United States' long-standing disposition toward, and need for, fabricating enemies and defining itself against them, which spans from well before the "red menace" of

the Cold War era to the present-day Iran (Schechter). This proclivity, exemplified nowhere more aptly than in George W. Bush's informal fallacy "You are either with us or against us" ("Address to a Joint Session"), can be observed here in the character of Betty, whose insistence on defining herself against her "enemies", resurfaces throughout the text.

Betty's binary of American superiority versus Iranian inferiority allows for no exceptions. Ranging from the physical to more complex phenomena such as culture, religion, social etiquette and lifestyle, Iranians are always denigrated. Such descriptions serve to reinforce the Orientalist binary and arouse in the Western reader a certain disgust at an entire nation. In spite of this, Mahmoody makes a point of disavowing any attempt to paint the relationship in absolutist terms: "Although I have said that our worlds are vastly different, I've never suggested that Iranian culture is bad and western culture is good" (Mahmoody and Dunchock 277).

Betty makes sure the minutest cultural differences or traditions are not exempted from her racist diatribes against things Iranian and Islamic. Her reductionist characterizations include highly selective portrayals of the city landscape or domestic spaces, the essentialist attribution of certain characteristics to people or places, or undermining of the Iranian nation in general. What is yet more astonishing is Mahmoody's assertion in her second book, after objections to the biased and racist depictions in the book and film: "I always understood that my ordeal in Iran was created by one individual – my husband. I never generalized about Iranians" (277). In the next sections, I will refute this assertion by analyzing Mahmoody's representations of Iran, focusing on major colonial tropes through which she represents the country and its people as well as how she juxtaposes the two countries to reinforce the binary of American superiority vis-à-vis Iranian/Muslim inferiority.

### **Writing Iranians Colonially**

In his Foucauldian theorization of the nexus between knowledge and power, Said effectively demonstrates that Orientalism (as a discourse) and colonialism coexist symbiotically, mutually reinforcing and investing one another with meaning. In his seminal *The Rhetoric of Empire*

(1993), David Spurr identifies a binarism in which “The colonizer’s traditional insistence on difference from the colonized establishes a notion of the savage as *other*, the antithesis of civilized value” (7). Spurr’s influential study identifies and analyzes twelve of the fundamental rhetorical features that figure prominently in colonial discourses. He also investigates the manner in which such rhetorical topoi have been deployed in the modern period of European and American colonization, and the more recent period of decolonization (1). In *NWMD*, Mahmoody draws significantly on this essentialist binary between the U.S. and Iran and extensively employs the Othering tropes of colonial discourse. In the context of this discussion, the tropes of *debasement*, *affirmation*, and *negation* are some of the more significant and recurring modes of writing about the Iranian Other. “Taken together”, Spurr argues, “these constitute a kind of repertoire for colonial discourse, a range of tropes, conceptual categories, and logical operations available for purposes of representation” (3). In the following, some of the most recurring instances and dominant tropes of colonial discourse will be elaborated.

### **Defilement and Contamination**

As a major trope in colonial discourse, images of defilement resurface throughout Mahmoody’s narrative and, by contributing to the ‘primitivism’ of Iranians, reinforce the idea of their inferiority to, and essential difference from, their American counterparts. In his analysis of the trope of *debasement*, Spurr argues that “In colonial discourse, every individual weakness has its political counterpart — uncivilized society according to this logic being little more than the uncivilized mind and body writ large” (76). Hence, the myriad instances of contamination and defilement depicted in the text – regardless of how authentic they might be in the first place – are far from mere descriptions of bodily or spatial attributes; rather, they are directly linked to moral judgments that form the basis of the trope of *debasement*.

In Mahmoody’s Iran filth and squalor seem to prevail. From the physical descriptions of Iranians to the descriptions of streets, schools, homes, cars, and foods, everything is characterized by filth, grime, and stench. From the very moment Mahmoody steps into “this alien world”, she is “struck ... by the overpowering stench of body odor” (5). Almost everyone she meets in and outside the airport reeks of perspiration. Although they may vary in their

degree of 'filthiness', the fact that all Iranians she meets are "foul-smelling" (250, 318) is presented as indubitable. One bus driver, for example, is "a particularly pungent Iranian" (275). Stinking seems to be such a distinctive feature of Iranian-ness that when she meets Zia, "one of an innumerable multitude of young male relatives" of Moody, she likes him not only because of his courtesy and sophistication or his being "taller than most of the small-statured Iranian men", but "best of all", because "he was clean" (7). Mahmoody worries immediately that having worn the scarf for some minutes, she "must smell like the rest of them by now" (9). It is not the summer heat or the crowded airport that is behind the stench of perspiration; Betty discovers, in next to no time, that it is because the most basic concepts of hygiene are alien to Iranians and simply beyond them. One such concept that Betty is always quick to point out is bathing. "Once a year", Betty proclaims, "everyone in Iran takes a bath" and that is for the occasion of Nowruz, the Persian New Year (163). Betty's 'discovery' of Iranian people's "taking a bath once a year" is contradicted by her reference to the Muslim ritual of showering after sex. However, according to her, even when Iranians shower after having sex, it is not for the purpose of hygiene, as she deems such concepts as alien to the Iranian mind. Rather, the ritual bathing is "to wash away the taint of sex" (85). Mahmoody further juxtaposes this "Iranian" proclivity with her own insistence on the "western custom" (29) of personal hygiene, when she recounts how while staying in her sister-in-law's house in Tehran, she was the only one who "continued to shower daily" while "Ameh Bozorg [Moody's elder sister] and the rest of her clan continued to stink" and were "dressed in the same filthy clothes day after day, despite the drenching heat" (27).

Mahmoody's focus on the corporeal resonates with a well-established colonial discourse vis-à-vis the natives. In colonial discourse, Spurr argues

the body of the primitive becomes as much the object of examination, commentary, and valorization as the landscape of the primitive. Under Western eyes, the body is that which is most proper to be primitive, the sign by which the primitive is represented. (22)

In this light, as the examples above demonstrate, Mahmoody's insistence on the physical defilement of Iranian people serves to reinforce their 'primitivism' which she then posits against 'American' notions of personal hygiene.

### **The Cult of Iranian Domesticity**

The trope of defilement does not stop at the level of the corporeal. Rather, it spills over into the interior of domestic spaces that Iranians occupy. Like the focus on the body of the natives, the scrutiny of the interior is a lineament of colonial discourses. Spurr argues that

An entire tradition in Western literature, from colonial American captivity narratives to the novels of Forster and Marlaux, has built itself around this trial of penetration into the interior spaces of non-European peoples. In these interiors the confrontation of cultures takes place face to face, or rather eye to eye, and it is here, at close range, that the gaze of the writer can have its most powerful effect. (19-20)

Certainly, Mahmoody's descriptions of interior Iranian spaces enhance the overall effect of primitivism and alienation that she creates throughout her text.

Mahmoody never runs short of examples to illustrate how alien cleanliness and organization are to Iranians. There are "no handkerchief or tissues" in Iran. Rather, what she had seen "was the women using these veils instead. The smell was repulsive" (24). Even though Betty tells us that the Iranian women are brought up to be submissive and "dutiful" housewives with no freedom at all (213,14), they seem not to be good at even the most rudimentary housewifely matters. At their best, Mahmoody proclaims, they are "haphazard housekeepers" (79). All the Iranian houses that Betty visits are represented as utterly unkempt shambles. The kitchen walls of Ammeh Bozorg's house, for instance, are "coated with the accumulated grease of decades" (20); Nassrine is "amazed to learn that walls could be washed and that hers were

originally white instead of grey" (93); and "Essey's kitchen, though filthy, was nonetheless sterile in comparison to Ameh Bozorg's" (32).<sup>24</sup>

Mahmoody employs the same descriptive vocabulary to represent Iranian culinary practices and eating manners. According to Mahmoody, Iranians do not seem to care about cleaning or washing food ingredients, which are almost always described as infested with "bugs" and "worms" (74, 97, 83). Nassrine is "an atrocious cook, neither knowing nor caring much about hygiene, nutrition, or palatability" and her supply of rice "was the filthiest I had seen, contaminated not only by tiny black bugs but also wriggling white worms. She did not bother to wash it prior to cooking" (83). Just in the same manner that the physical 'defilement' of Iranians drives Betty to proclaim her "loathing" for Iran (35), the alleged contamination and poor organization of interior spaces drives her toward the same conclusion:

I hate her [Ammeh Bozorg]. She is dirty, filthy. Every time you go into the kitchen, somebody is eating over the stove and the food is dribbling back into the pot. They serve tea and they don't wash the cups and there are bugs in the food and worms in the rice and the house stinks. (74)

Betty's descriptions of the domestic politics of Iranian households invoke the Cult of Domesticity or Cult of True Womanhood, deeply ingrained in the minds of 19th century Americans (Brown 507). The Cult emphasized cleanliness, arrangement, and organization of household environments and paraphernalia as well as proper wifely/womanly skills deemed necessary to run a 'perfect' household. Moreover, as Gillian Brown has pointed out, "since kitchens both provide for families and display the systems of political economy with which domestic economy intersects, the responsible housekeeper observes the significance of kitchen things and seeks the best governing system for an orderly domesticity" (90). Mahmoody's

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<sup>24</sup> Representations of Iranian household politics in *NWMD* resonate with some of the most famous passages of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, especially those of Southern kitchens. The Iranian women's kitchen government is represented as erratic and lacking any systematic order, just the way Old Aunt Dinah's is in Stowe's book. Dinah's kitchen in Little Eva St. Clare's New Orleans home "looked as if it had been arranged by a hurricane blowing through it" (311) with "the rolling-pin under her bed, and the nutmeg-grater in her pocket with her tobacco" and "sixty-five different sugar bowls, one in every hole in the house" (317). She has "about as many places for each cooking utensil as there were days in the year" (297).



descriptions of Iranian interiorities can also be read as part of a longer tradition of women travelers (such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu) comparing domestic environments, and many more who used the domestic scene as a device for Orientalist denigration.

Characteristically, Mahmoody establishes Betty – who embodies the ideal domestic economy and whose household and skills represent a standard of domestic excellence – as the antithesis to Iranian women’s allegedly slipshod household politics and irresponsible domestic management. Unlike Iranian women, Betty is represented as clean, frugal, and well-organized and embodies the character of a true American woman *par excellence*. One could argue that Mahmoody’s descriptions constitute a kind of projection, via the Other, of an image of an idealized Americanness, revealed as an ideal of white American femininity and offer an occasion for using the Other as a kind of mirror – a way of constructing a self-image. As such, similar to the stark contrast between the lifestyles of the black Ophelia and Dinah in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the promiscuous ‘Iranian’ housekeeping, scandalizes the white American woman, offending her sense of domestic propriety (Brown 503). In addition, similar to the political connection established between kitchen economy and slavery in Stowe’s book, Mahmoody’s representations of Iranian women’s domestic (mis)management culminates in the discussion of the abject slaveries of Iranian women: to their husbands, their traditions, and above all to their religion.

### **Affirmation, Negation, and Bestialization**

Two other major rhetorical strategies in colonial discourse, *negation* and *affirmation*, are apposite to the discussion of Mahmoody’s text. Succinctly defined, *negation* is the strategy by which “Western writing conceives of the Other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death” (Spurr 92). It is the act of marginalizing, or rather effacing, the Other, treating the Other as a nonentity. The process of negation assigns less value to non-Western cultures, thus, in a sense “negating” their value (Walker 84). Negation spans a wide gamut of issues, from the very existence and identity of the Other to the space, history, culture, or language with which they are associated. Every aspect of the Other’s life can potentially become subject to this strategy;

the Oriental subject, as well as all the elements that constitute their character, is constantly nullified, negated, and silenced.

*Affirmation*, on the other hand, is the validation of the cultural, political, and imperial presence of the Western subject/writer and a reaffirmation of the value of their presence in the face of the Other's engulfing nothingness. In other words, it is the gesture in which "the subject actually constitutes itself through repetition, allies itself with the law, and strengthens itself against imminent danger from without or within" (Spurr 110). Affirmation's primary function in colonial discourse is to justify, by dint of demonstrations of moral superiority, the authority of those in control of the discourse (110). As is evident from its definition, affirmation is deeply rooted in Kipling's notion of "The White Man's Burden": the idea that the "superior" white race, should take it upon themselves, due to their moral and cultural ascendancy, to rule over and "better" the colored races. This civilizing mission, as it were, requires the constant negation of the Other to open up a space for the affirmation of the Western subject, made even stronger by means of iteration and recurrence. *Affirmation* and *negation* are two of the most inextricably interwoven rhetorical figures in colonial discourse. One could argue that one always necessitates the other: in negating any aspect of the Other, one is affirming their own sovereign position, which is either explicitly stated or implied.

In *NWMD*, Mahmoody devotes much of her story to the "primitivism" that characterizes Iranian manners. One prominent example is Iranian eating etiquette. "Eating", Betty declares, "is the primary social activity of these people" (183), thus imparting the primitivism and lack of sophistication of Iranians, who, in her eyes, are not the least acquainted with the most basic forms of socialization and social decorum. In fact, all modes of socialization by Iranians are negated here and reduced to the level of the animalistic.

Mahmoody juxtaposes the lack of any social sophistication in Iranian culture with instances of the social gatherings and activities she and Moody attended in the U.S., thus contrasting their sophisticated socializations with the well-to-do and the elite in the U.S. to Iranian gatherings, which, according to her, primarily focused on eating. To Mahmoody, only

gatherings of their American friends qualify as proper socialization. The Iranian students' meetings to discuss politics and the upcoming revolution in Iran, even though not held for the mere purpose of eating, are denounced as fanatical, suspicious, and unsophisticated.

In *NWMD*, one can often find the animalization of the Iranian Other at work as a descriptive strategy. The use of animal metaphors and similes is common practice within the domain of colonial discourse. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a famous editor of American captivity narratives and one of "great Indian haters", wrote in his prefatory note to *Narrative of a Late Expedition* (1783) of the necessity of eliminating entirely those "animals, vulgarly called Indians" (Pearce 10). This animalization of the Other in captivity narratives served to dehumanize them and render them as inferior, in need of taming and civilization, or annihilated outright. Mahmoody employs the same vocabulary to describe the physical and behavioral features of Iranians. "The moment we entered the house", Bettynotes, "Moody's hawk-nosed sister came running. She shrieked with delight and fell upon him, showering him with kisses" (164). Mahmoody's references to "Iranian" eating etiquette are described in tellingly animalistic terms: "Sitting on the floor cross-legged or perched on one knee, the Iranians attacked the meal like a herd of untamed animals desperate for food" (15). The fact that some people prefer to sit on the floor and spread a *sofreh* (usually an oilcloth spread on the floor for eating) on which they arrange the foods is not regarded as a signifier of cultural and traditional diversity. Rather, its difference from the cultural norms of the white Western writer renders it abnormal and bizarre, therefore deserving condescension and derision.

Almost all descriptions of family gatherings and parties in the book, except when the host is a Westerner or a Westernized Iranian, depict Iranians "shoveling" the food "indiscriminately into their chattering mouth that spilled and dribbled bits and pieces all over the sofrays<sup>25</sup> and carpets and back into the serving bowls" (15). Characteristically, Mahmoody pits her own socially sophisticated manners against those of Iranians, thus affirming her

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<sup>25</sup> The correct spelling would be *sofreh*. Such misspellings apply to almost every single Persian word that Mahmoody transliterates.

American civility and superiority and negating that of the Iranians. Her invitation of Moody's family for dinner is one such instance:

Within moments my dining room was a mess. Bits of food flew all about the table and onto the floor as the guests plunged in with their hands<sup>26</sup> and, occasionally, a spoon. Moody, Mahtob, and I ate quietly, using the proper utensils ... I knew I would be up late that night cleaning grains of rice and other scraps of food from the walls and out of the carpet. (292)

What makes such descriptions even more extraordinary is Mahmoody's references to the fact that Moody's family were far from average Iranians and were, in fact, from the upper crust of the society (2, 27, 191, 248):

In the midst of this strange society ... we were counted among the elite. We bore the prestige of a respected family that, compared to the norm, was far advanced in sophistication and culture ... and we were, in relative terms, rich (27).

The examples above indicate the interconnectedness of the tropes of debasement, animalization, negation, and affirmation and the manner in which they reoccur and reinforce one another and serve to represent a dehumanized, primitive Other. At the other end of the Orientalizing gaze – and in contrast to the land where people “accepted the squalor as the norm” (259) – however, lies Betty's America that appears utterly devoid of such “Iranian” characteristics and is pure, sophisticated, and proper. Such dichotomization could signify a kind of purging reflex — a projection of a utopia via the squalor of the Other, a Puritan cleansing of Otherness within and without.<sup>27</sup>

Mahmoody explains that even those ‘exceptional’ Iranians who appreciate hygiene and cleanliness go to the United States to relish them. Early on in the story Mahmoody juxtaposes

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<sup>26</sup> Besides the animalistic imagery deployed to describe Betty's guests, eating with hands is not a common practice in Iran and any Iranian reader is bound to be astonished by such willful misrepresentation which seems to be primarily done to accentuate the idea of primitivism and incivility.

<sup>27</sup> After all, in the manner of the scapegoat, Moody is within the family/America and must be driven out.

Iran and America sharply by contrasting the ideas of hygiene and social justice. On several occasions, she claims that the highest level of cleanliness on the Iranian scale is still considered “filthy” by American standards. This statement serves multiple purposes instantly: debasing what she sees as belonging to the Other and therefore different from her native culture; negating the diversity and heterogeneity of an entire nation and squeezing them into pigeonholes; and affirming the superiority of ‘American’ cultural values. She contrasts the two countries again, when she hopes that Moody would come to his senses and “realize that his professional future was in America, not in a backward nation that had yet to learn the lessons of basic hygiene and social justice” (49).<sup>28</sup> Those extremely few “cultured” Iranians whom she encounters are those who are, in one way or another, linked with the United States either via their education, moving between the two countries, or merely being among those who “retain an appreciation of the western style of life” (106). Dr. Najafee, a family friend, for example, divides his time between the two countries, “coming here [to Iran] to earn exorbitant fees in his private practice, and spending six months of the year in California attending seminars, studying, and appreciating freedom and cleanliness” (245). Lack of hygiene seems to be so intrinsic a component of Iranian character that even when Betty encounters “clean” Iranians, she tends to identify them as Americans. She does not conceal her surprise at having encountered “a whole new circle of wonderful loving people, who delighted in civilized living, who were, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, far more American than Iranian” (305). It is not only the American Betty who tends to identify the “civilized” Iranians as Americans. The “civilized” and “cultured” Iranians themselves do not seem to wish to be associated with Iran, either. Of two of her “civilized” friends she learns

the wonderful fact that both Chamsey and Zaree lived ten months of each year in America ... Zaree was about fifteen years older than Chamsey. A widow, she now lived with her sister. Her English was not as polished as Chamsey's, but she, too, was very friendly to me. Both women considered themselves Americans. (245)

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<sup>28</sup> I will discuss later, drawing on the case of Dr. Mahmoody's treatment by the judiciary system of the US, the irony of criticizing the Iranian social justice system.

Also, Betty remembers how her friend “Chamsey was excited about severing most of her ties to Iran and eager to return to California” (279). Betty’s descriptions of this Westernized Iranian elite resonates with Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite* (*The Location of Culture* 86). In the same light, Spurr has also argued that in colonial discourse,

The desire for Western styles of consumption ... is seen as a natural aspiration toward a better life, while it is also treated as a sign of weakness. There is a certain contempt for non-Western peoples who appear so ready to abandon their traditions. (86)

Betty’s sympathy and association with the Westernized Iranian elite is only to the extent that they embrace and affirm ‘American’ values. Even in doing so, Betty notes a certain hypocrisy and disingenuity among Iranians, as exemplified in the claim that “Although Moody’s countrymen officially hate Americans, they venerate the American educational system” (3).

It is not only Betty who upholds the superiority of Americans above Iranians. According to Mahmoody, even Iranians themselves recognize the fact that any foreigner is cleaner than an Iranian. The real estate agent who is helping Betty find a house is “delighted to learn that an American couple was looking for housing” and shows them several “western style” apartments owned either by investors living abroad or by “cultured Iranians who wished to keep them in good condition”. These investors, according to Mahmoody, seem to recognize that “the easiest way to accomplish that was to refuse to rent them to Iranians” (268). On another occasion, she reminisces how she had no other choice but to forsake her American standards and adjust herself to the dramatically inferior and backward Iranian lifestyle and stoop so low as to be “ecstatic” to be provided with the rare opportunity of eating clean food:

Together we spent hours meticulously cleaning the bugs out of the rice before we cooked it. How strange it was to be ecstatic over the opportunity to remove vermin from my food! In two months my priorities had changed dramatically. I realized how the American lifestyle had pampered me into fretting about minor concerns. Here, everything was different. Already I had learned that I must not allow the details of daily

existence to impinge upon larger tasks. If there were bugs in the rice, you cleaned them out. If the baby pooped on the Persian carpet, you wiped up the mess. If your husband wanted to leave the park early, you left. (79)

As was mentioned before, *negation* results in exclusion, marginalizing, and erasing the Iranian Other (Walker 24). In all of the above excerpts both *negation* and *affirmation* occur conjunctively. Iran is assigned as the locus of the animalistic, the uncivilized, the abject, while the U.S. is extolled as the embodiment of civilization, culture, sophistication, and propriety. What is also conspicuous in the above examples is the act of the Other's negation of their native value system and affirming the Westerner's superiority by assuming the 'refined' position of being Westernized. Not only is the Westernized Iranian depicted as complicit in the debasement of everything related to their country, they are also being distinguished from un-Westernized Iranians and exempted from the turpitude that characterizes them. More significantly, they are credited by the Westerner with the power to recognize and bear witness to the vices of their native ways, a gesture that earns them the status of pseudo-Westerners.

### **Multitudinous Others**

One of the most familiar and dominant leitmotifs of colonial discourse – especially when white women's 'entrapment' is concerned – is the image of the mob and the ochlophobic sensation native crowds create inside the Western subject. De Hart has argued that intrinsic to captivity narratives and Orientalist accounts are "the recurring description of large crowds of people that threaten the Western individual just by being there, because they all look the same, speak foreign languages and smell terrible" (56). Such descriptions reinforce the image of the Western woman as stranded in the land of the 'enemy' amongst the alien, frightening, and unpredictable forces of an entire nation or religion which can apparently turn against the Western woman at any given moment and for no particular reason.

Analyzing representations of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Hostage Crisis in his *Covering Islam* (1981), Said demonstrates how Iranians are almost always depicted as an "anonymous", "deindividualized", and "dehumanized" mob (6, 35, 43, 48, 86, 87, 95, 101). Such

images of multitudes and mobs run through Mahmoody's narrative. Right from her arrival, Betty finds herself surrounded by Moody's "innumerable multitude of young male relatives" (7). Walking in the streets of Tehran, Betty cannot but think of herself as a foreign woman entrapped "in a city of fourteen million sometimes hostile and often unpredictable people" (274).<sup>29</sup> As Spurr has argued, the people of the Third World "are both reduced and magnified into the equivalent of natural disaster: influx, epidemic, inundation, the flooding of border" (91). In the foregoing example, the sheer (imaginary) number of the people of Tehran resembles the force and might of an unpredictable and impending natural catastrophe, such as might be associated with a hurricane, a tsunami, or an earthquake. Images of huge masses of people recur throughout the book and words like "multitude" (6, 32, 33, 68, 273) are often used to connote the intimidating mass identity of Iranians and undermine their individual differences, which stand in stark contrast to Protestant ideas of individualism and one's individual relationship with God.

Walker has also discussed the "appearance of swarming people", as an image frequently found within examples of colonial discourse (67). Similarly, Spurr observes how Western reporting of and photography of the Third World tends to favor images of crowds, depicting "the people, often as chaotic, irrational mobs", while stories from the Western world depict images of "well-groomed individuals, leaders identified by name, and portrayed as rational even in crisis" (165). Also, in his discussion of images of filth and defilement in the Third world countries, Spurr demonstrates how "the crowded populations of the Third World take on the teeming, spawning character of disease itself" (88).

### **The Linguistic Sovereignty**

Part of the Iranian culture that Mahmoody castigates in *NWMD* is the Persian/Farsi language. Language is one of the most crucial touchstones of any culture, especially in Western philosophy. As Spurr has delineated, so fundamental to human culture is language that some

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<sup>29</sup> It seems that Mahmoody's insistence on the erroneous figure for the population of Tehran (26, 67, 154, 248) is meant to evoke in the reader a sense of alarm and apprehension. According to the *Atlas of Tehran Metropolis*, the city's population at the time was less than six million ("Population Increase").



philosophers, like Rousseau, have expressed uncertainty as to whether the provenance of language lies within organized human society or vice versa. From ancient times, the notion of civilization has been so contingent upon the idea of language that the word barbarian (in Greek *barbaros*) originally meant “one who babbled, who did not speak the language of civilized humanity” (Spurr 102). A language is evaluated based on its “richness and complexity, its refinement from mere cry and gesture, its capacity to make distinctions, its multiplicity of names, its range from particularity to abstraction and its organization of time and space” (Spurr 102). In the domain of colonial discourse, language holds such an authoritative dominion that “the negation of civilized language as a faculty of the Other leads, through a series of related negations, to a conclusion which upholds the justice of colonial rule” (Spurr 103).

One can find references to language in the earliest figurations of the Other. There is a long-standing history of denying the non-Western subject the power of language and assigning them such features as muteness and incoherence, going as far back as Aristotle. As Spurr argues, the Other is “denied a voice in the ordinary idiomatic sense – not permitted to speak – and in a more radical sense – not recognized as capable of speech” (Spurr 104), an idea that goes hand in hand with the trope of infantilization in the discourse of Orientalism. Furthermore, similar to the trope of debasement – where the Other’s countenance and physical surroundings signify their moral failure and depravity – “the degraded or inadequate condition of language signifies a corresponding degradation in the political and social order of the other” (Spurr 104).

*Not Without My Daughter* draws on the issue of the Persian/Farsi language to further elaborate the alleged inferiority and primitivism of Iranian culture and people. As is the case with many modern examples of colonialist writing, the unintelligibility and incoherence of the language of the Other resurfaces throughout the text, thus “reaffirming language as a primary site of the effort to divide cultural presence from its opposite, which is to say clarity from confusion, articulation from silence” (Spurr 104). In this light, throughout *NWMD* the language of the Iranian people is described as discordant, incomprehensible, and violent.

In *NWMD*, Mahmoody describes family conversations as “the never-ending chatter of imponderable tongues” (18). Knowing that not many Westerners have been exposed to the “discordance” of Persian, she decides to familiarize them with the language: “To a westerner a normal Iranian conversation appears to be a heated argument filled with shrill chatter and expansive gestures ... The noise level is astounding” (18). Almost all “unappetizing scenes” of hungry Iranians “attacking” the food are “accompanied by a cacophony of Farsi” (15), and when Moody’s relatives go to visit them, Mahmoody recounts how “the now-familiar din of chattering relatives assailed our ears” (33). Even though Mahmoody confesses to her ignorance of Persian language – which is also manifest in numerous mispronunciations and misspellings of Persian words – she claims, without hesitation, that the school teachers spend “most of their time in chatter that, although I could not understand the content, was obviously idle gossip” (115), a statement reminding one of Said’s observation that “Orientalists know things by definition that Orientals cannot know on their own” (*Orientalism* 300).

Once again, not only does the Western author negate the Iranian language, in so doing she is also widening the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the two cultures, and at the same time feeding into the xenophobic sentiment she has generated so far, by revealing another ‘menacing’ feature of the Other’s culture. Hence, Mahmoody manages to construct an image of the non-Western language, which “signifies its inherent unintelligibility, and thus its reduction to a cultural zero degree” (Spurr 104). Also, like every other ‘Iranian’ attribute, Persian language is not only contrasted with that of English, but is also used to judge the character of interlocutors. The Westernized Chamsey<sup>30</sup> who spends ten months of each year in America speaks to Betty “kindly in impeccable English” (270). Describing Moody’s relatives, Betty observes that “The other half [of the clan] seemed a bit more westernized, more open to variation, more cultured and friendly, and definitely more hygienic. They were more likely to speak English and were far more courteous to Mahtob and me” (32). Similar to the role that language plays in the development of societies and cultures, it also plays a significant role in

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<sup>30</sup> The correct spelling would be *Shamsi*, or *Shamsy*.

Mahmoody's description of Moody's 'overnight' transmogrification from a gracious, professional 'American' doctor into an Iranian brute:

I noticed a strange new style to Moody's speech. At home he would have said, "You didn't ..." Now he avoided the contraction, speaking in the more formal style often used by those to whom English is a second tongue. Long ago Moody had Americanized his language. Why the change? I wondered silently. Had he reverted to thinking in Farsi, translating into English before he spoke? (21)

As the excerpt suggests, Moody's alleged reverting to Farsi is represented as part of his greater 'backsliding' into his Iranian ways, and serves to mark the two Moodys off from one another.

The issue of language also figures prominently in the cinematic version of the story. This appears not only in the shrill, high-pitched conversations in Persian (almost always by non-Iranian actors), but more importantly in the total absence of subtitles in the film, given that Betty (played by Sally Field) is the only main character who speaks only English and a rather considerable proportion of the dialogues are exchanged in Persian/Farsi. This cinematic stratagem reinforces the foreignness of the Iranian Other and magnifies the sense of alienation and apprehension of the protagonist, as well as the audience. In his review on the film, Roger Ebert raises significant questions about the lack of subtitles:

It is one of the hallmarks of this film's style that no foreign speech is ever translated with subtitles. All of the "good" people in the film speak English. Everybody else speaks – usually in shrill, angry tones – in a tongue we cannot understand, and which is never subtitled. It must have been a deliberate decision to leave out the subtitles. Surely we would benefit by knowing the content of key conversations? Surely it would be interesting to hear the Muslim point of view articulated, whether or not we agree with it. Surely there must be one person in Iran who does not scream with spite and hostility? Yes, but then the Muslims in the film would be somewhat humanized, and the film is at pains to make them alien ciphers. Racism works by denying a people its specific humanity, and turning it into a stereotyped collection of negative attributes. (Ebert)

Parinaz Eleish, an Iranian-born Boston filmmaker, also adds that “The main actors are not Iranian, and the background actors who are Iranian have no lines at all or scream the whole time or talk without subtitles so they look like screaming lunatics” (Stocker). One could argue that, perhaps in an ironic way, the lack of subtitles and the unintelligibility of Iranian conversations are an extension of how, through such representations, Iranian people have been perpetually ‘silenced’ and negated by a dominant Orientalist Western discourse.

### **The Mad Muslim Man**

In a 2002 Finnish documentary, *Without My Daughter*, Dr. Seyed Bozorg Mahmoody, Betty’s former husband, begins his version of the events thus: “I am a beast and a criminal in the eyes of the world. I have been portrayed as a liar, a woman-beater, and a kidnapper” (Tervo and Kouros). The statement, however, is more than a summing-up of how Dr. Mahmoody is perceived in the eyes of the world. It is a fragment of the vast array of dehumanizing adjectives that are always attributed to the Oriental Muslim male in Western media and literature and which are complicit in his demonization and bestialization. In other words, it is the jailer-prisoner, oppressor-oppressed interrelationship that frames and reinforces the manner in which both the Oriental male and female are perceived. In this Orientalist dichotomy, each side imparts meaning to and reinforces the other while justifying its existence. In addition to their mutual interdependence, it is the amalgamation of Oriental male and female, the intercourse of the ‘Oriental brute’ with the ‘Oriental sex object’ that delivers for the Western audience the expected perception of the Orient. In the words of Ziauddin Sardar, “symbolically, the violent and the barbaric Muslim male and the sensual passive female, come together to represent the perfect Orient of Western perception” (48).

Betty Mahmoody’s Orientalized Iran is no exception. It is a “crazy” (191), “bizarre” (389), and “horrid” (103) land, inhabited by violent Muslim male chauvinists who batter their wives to death, incarcerate them, and torture them on a whim. The book is packed with scenes where Moody humiliates his American wife whenever he has the chance and subjects her to both physical and mental torments in cold blood (200). Nevertheless, it is not only Moody, Betty’s

American-turned-Iranian husband, who commits such heinous acts of violence; one can find evidence of masculine oppression and brutality everywhere. Recounting the story of Ellen, another American woman married to an Iranian doctor, Betty tells her reader how similarly Hormoz treated her:

Once in Tehran, Ellen found herself hostage just as I was. Hormoz decreed that she was never going home. She was an Iranian citizen subject to the laws of the country and to his will. He locked her up for a time and beat her. (148)

After Moody has slammed her down, punched her, and screamed that he is going to kill her (102), Betty informs her readers, quoting an insider, Nassrine, how all Iranian men are the same: “It is ok. All men are like this. Mammal does the same thing to me. Reza does the same thing to Essey. All men are like this” (103). These ‘insider’ confessions serve to corroborate Mahmoody’s depictions of the country’s misogynistic culture and the pervasiveness of the brutality of Muslim manhood.

In a scene in the movie we see Ellen, Betty’s American friend whom she has met in a Quran class, beaten black and blue by her Iranian husband, with her lower lip torn and bruised, because she has revealed Betty’s secret escape plan to her husband. “It is your duty as a wife”, Hormoz, her husband yells at Betty, “to tell your husband everything. You cannot have secrets”. The event, which Ellen denies ever happened in her interview in the documentary *Without His Daughter*, does not exist in the book and seems tagged on to the film – just like many other fictionalized events – only to reinforce the omnipresence of Iranian domestic violence and masculine brutality.

In *For the Love of a Child*, Mahmoody gives her readers a follow-up on Ellen’s condition: the torture is still being inflicted, with the difference being that her Iranian husband has grown more professional and “brags about being able to beat us up without leaving any marks” (248). Mahmoody’s second book is almost entirely devoted to similar sensationalized accounts substantiating how irrational and perilous an adventure marrying non-Americans is. The book offers no room for intercultural complexities, cultural diversity, social heterogeneity, and cross-

cultural dialogue, and, much like *NWMD*, reiterates the long-established narrative of innocent American girls trapped in the clutches of criminal foreign men.

It is not only Betty who falls prey to Moody's vicious and mercurial fits of rage. The five-year-old innocent Mahtob seems to experience her fair share of her father's aggression: "In blind anger, he backhanded her sharply across the face. Blood spurted from a cut on her upper right lip, spattering into the dust" (68). It is no wonder, then, that when, in her second book, Mahmoody recounts to Mahtob the news of "a plane crash" in Iran in 1987,<sup>31</sup> she replies: "'Good! I hope my dad was on it!'" (28).

Betty's demonization of Iranian manhood does not stop there. Iranian men, we are reminded throughout the book, are not just misogynists of the first order, barbaric woman- and child-beaters, pungent, and cacophonous. They are also represented as molesters and sexual perverts. One of the few Iranians whom Betty does not immediately hate is the bus driver who helps her find the right bus home. Nevertheless, he turns out to be an opportunistic groper when he "presses his horrid, foul-smelling body" up against her (276). Intrepid as Betty is, she manages to escape from the driver. Mahmoody catalogues the event as another instance of xenophobia, quoting Essey's claim that such acts are only performed on "foreign women" (266).

Any discussion of Muslim Oriental masculinity would be insufficient without recognizing its interdependence with that of the Oriental femininity. It is in relation to the Oriental woman that the picture of the Oriental male can be best appreciated. Similar to the Oriental/Muslim woman, the characteristics attributed to the Oriental Muslim male – his barbarism, brutality, perversion, and molestation – do not exist in a vacuum and are triggered and manifested mostly vis-à-vis women. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of this interrelationship, one needs to examine the Oriental man and woman in relation to one another.

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<sup>31</sup> There has been no such plane crash in Iran in 1987. By the "plane crash" Mahmoody seems to be referring to the shooting down of a civilian jet airliner, known as Flight 655, by a U.S. cruiser in the Persian Gulf, in which all 290 passengers died. The event marked a watershed in Iran-U.S. relationship and significantly reinforced anti-American government feelings in Iran. Far from acknowledging any wrongdoing, the U.S. has refused to formally apologize to Iran to this date. In fact, on 2 August 1988, the then-U.S. vice president – George H. W. Bush – proclaimed that "I will never apologize for the United States, ever. I don't care what the facts are ... I'm not an apologize-for-America kind of guy" (Kinsley).

### Going Native: From American Gentleman to Iranian Brute

The difference between Iranian men and their American counterparts is nowhere better exemplified than in Mahmoody's constant references to the Americanized Moody who seems to have lapsed back into his Iranian self. In the book's discourse on Iranian Muslim men, what stands out conspicuously is how Moody is depicted as metamorphosing from a polished American gentleman into an Iranian brute after returning to Iran.

The ubiquitous idea in the book that Iranians are a "backward" nation – one of Mahmoody's favorite terms – falls perfectly in line with the proclivity of the Orientalist discourse for assigning "the Islamic Orient to an essentially ancient time and the West to modernity" (Said *Orientalism* 271). Mahmoody seems to maintain that Moody had had enough of his homeland and had therefore left it for good and decided to reside in the United States, where "he found a world far different from his childhood, one that offered affluence, culture and basic human dignity that surpassed anything available in Iranian society", which then leads her to conclude that "Moody truly wanted to be a westerner" (49). Now back in Iran, Betty cannot but wonder why he has descended from being "an osteopathic anesthesiologist, a respected professional with an annual income approaching one hundred thousand dollars" in the U.S. into being "merely Ameh Bozorg's [his elder sister] little boy once again" (9).

In this context, marriage seems to serve as a site where the 'real' nature of the Oriental man is revealed and "the savage in the Oriental prince emerges" (De Hart 55). As Betty De Hart believes, the mysterious, "exotic" part, which had originally constituted part of the courtship appeal becomes increasingly more menacing, so much so that over time the Westernized Oriental prince transmogrifies into a monster. This itself, both taps into the idea of the unreliability of the Other, while at the same time feeding back into it as well; the fact that no matter how civilized (that is, Westernized) the Oriental man might look, there is always a frightening and untrustworthy facet that he has managed to keep under the façade of his civility: "His beautiful dark eyes become dangerously sparkling. His strength and decisiveness

turn into dominance and authoritarian behavior. His protectiveness and courtesy become jealousy and possessiveness that obstruct the woman's freedom" (De Hart 55) .

The transformation in the nature of the Oriental man is often characterized by an immediacy and unpredictability. Betty recounts how in the United States, Moody had always been the perfect gentleman, an ardent suitor from the very start, "courting her in style", showering her with compliments and gifts, and always admiring her motherly care for her children. "My life was filled with roses," Mahmoody nostalgically reminisces (51). When she is obsessed with the notion that "once Moody brought Mahtob and me to Iran, he would try to keep us there forever", her fellow-American friends assure her that her obsession is irrational and "Moody would never do that" as he was "thoroughly Americanized" and thus no longer untrustworthy (3). In the film, Moody reiterates the same sentiment reassuring his daughter that he is "as American as apple pie" (Gilbert). Betty, nevertheless, has "ample ground" to think ill of Moody's intentions: "his renewed devotion to Islamic rituals" (Mahmoody and Dunchock 44). In the U.S., Moody had been a successful doctor and "a loving husband and father", which qualified him as a real American family man who had achieved the American Dream. Nevertheless, he appears to have transmogrified, as soon as he set foot on Iranian turf, into a tyrannical husband and father intent on incarcerating and beating his wife and daughter into submission. The transformation, according to Mahmoody, is "the influence of the Iranian, Islamic culture and family that changes him from the prince into a monster", a change that manifests itself in Moody's "backsliding into his own culture and tradition" (De Hart 55). Such stereotyping leaves many turns and twists of the plot ambiguous and at times engenders a *deus ex machina* effect. Some critics have questioned the abrupt transformation of Moody from a doting husband and professional doctor into a monster. Nayereh Towhidi, an Iranian-American professor of Gender & Women Studies at California State University, points to the movie's failure

to explain how and why Betty's Iranian husband goes through such an apparently abrupt change from decent father and loving husband to fiend once he is home again. Such an



unreal and simplistic portrayal of the main character indicates the filmmakers' lack of knowledge and understanding of Iranian culture and the Iranian psyche. (Tohidi)

The "change", however, does not seem to have occurred only to Moody's temperament. Every other aspect of his character appears to have undergone some sort of negative mutation. This mutation gradually reveals itself in such other forms as Moody's language (as demonstrated in the discussion of language above), even though he had "long ago Americanized his language" (21). Moody's apparently rekindled devotion to his native religion, Islam, is another marked change which, according to Betty, seems to have had far-reaching repercussions for Mahmoody, Mahtob, and Moody himself. We are told that Moody did not practice "the extreme form of Islam under which he had been raised" (even though it is not obvious what the phrase actually means), "enjoyed his glass of liquor", and overall could not be considered an observant Muslim (47). Nevertheless, he seems to have regained his faith with rekindled passion, once back in his country. This fresh interest, however, is far from innocent and stretches way beyond a nostalgic reunion with faith.

Although the perfectly Americanized Moody is cast as an ideal husband and father, he is not without his innate Oriental faults and one can still see the collision of his Eastern and Western selves through Mahmoody's descriptions, which serve to reaffirm Betty's Western supremacist outlook. Describing Moody's "paradoxical personality" early in the story, Betty paints her husband in a chiaroscuro: "His mind was a blend of brilliance and dark confusion. Culturally he was a mixture of east and west" (4). It goes without saying that the "brilliance" is the result of his years of Westernization and the "dark confusion" is rooted in Oriental mysteriousness and bewilderment.

In Mahmoody's second book, it becomes evident that the metamorphosis is not only unique to Mahmoody's Iranian husband. Mahmoody claims that the process of metamorphosis during which the husbands are de-Americanized and revert to their "primitive" native roots befalls every non-American husband (and wife, too), once again reinforcing the notion of the intrinsic non-American untrustworthiness. Mahmoody's sequel is fraught with similar stories of

Iraqi, Pakistani, Algerian, Iranian, and Yemeni fathers (never a Westerner) who, she claims, have abducted their children and undergone the same transmogrification as Moody's. All these people are similarly described in culturally degrading terms, reducing the complexities of child abduction cases to stereotypically villainous fathers and victimized mothers, or, vice versa if the father is either an American or a "naturalized U.S. citizen" (110).

### **"Veiled Humanity": The Oriental Accomplice**

Would she [Mahtob] become a woman like Nasserine, or Essey, cloaking her beauty, her spirit, her soul, in the chador? Would Moody marry her off to a cousin who would beat her and impregnate her with vacant-eyed, deformed babies? (103)

Almost the whole gamut of stereotypes used to describe the Oriental Muslim woman appears throughout Mahmoody's memoir. One could argue that Flaubert's assertion that "the Oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man" (Said *Orientalism* 187) is particularly relevant to Betty's image of Iran. All one would need to do is to divert the Oriental gaze from the oriental woman's sexual submissiveness to a more general conception of her subservience. As Said argues, chief among the repository of Oriental women's characteristics is that they ooze with "unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (*Orientalism* 207).

The very "willingness" that allowed the white male European colonizers/travelers of the last few centuries like Flaubert to enjoy the luxury of licentious Oriental sex, here earns the Iranian woman Mahmoody's eternal contempt. From the very outset, it seems impossible to overlook "how Iranian women are slaves to their husbands" and "how their religion as well as their government coerced them at every turn, the practice exemplified by their haughty insistence upon an antiquated and even unhealthy dress code" (35). The image of the veiled and "submissive Iranian woman" (102) pervades Mahmoody's memoir. Almost all references to Muslim women are accompanied by Betty's deep contempt for the veil. Characteristically, the historical, social, religious, and particularly political significance of the veil do not figure in the

text. Instead, the Muslim dress code is always rejected wholesale, while at the same time the superiority of the Western female dress code is affirmed.

Like much else in the narrative, Mahmoody's representations of "oppressed" Muslim women are not exempt from the internal inconsistency that characterizes many Orientalist narratives. In fact, her representations of the alleged submissiveness of Iranian women are contradicted by her repeated references to the matriarchal position of Moody's elder sister who, according to Betty, runs the whole "clan" (147): "Moody's sister ... was the matriarch of the family, whom everyone addressed with a title of deep respect, Ameh Bozorg, 'Great-aunt'" (5). In fact, as Homa Hoodfar, an Iranian-Canadian sociologist, has pointed out in her analysis of the colonial images of Muslim women, even though Iranian/Muslim women are always depicted as oppressed and passive, they hold more power in their domestic domain than their Western counterparts, a fact that many Western travelers and commentators have simply dismissed as exceptional (7). Along the same lines, Pershang Vaziri has remarked that "Even though women have more freedom here [in the U.S.] legally, they don't enjoy as much power. Because family structure is stronger in Iran, and women rule the family, socially they have more power there" (Stocker). Nevertheless, in Mahmoody's account women are stripped of all facets of their humanity and reduced to compliant, veiled automata who must only perform what they are commanded or programmed to do. Nassrine is a "dutiful Islamic spy" (126) who has apparently no will of her own, has to report on Betty's activities, and cannot intervene when Betty is being battered by her husband.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, oppression is not represented as merely every Iranian woman's lot; foreign women who are married to Iranians seem to suffer the same fate. In other words, any encounter between the Oriental and Western subjects seems to afflict the latter and make them suffer what Spurr has dubbed "the demoralizing crisis of going native" (84).<sup>33</sup> Even Helen, Betty's American friend betrays Betty and divulges her secret to her

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<sup>32</sup> Nor can any of the teachers in the film, when Moody attacks and almost kills Betty in the school corridor.

<sup>33</sup> This is, in fact, a persistent fear in Western traditions, especially in the heyday of colonial era. Francis Bacon warned against the influence of travelling to foreign lands in the *Of Travel* section of his *Essays*: "let it appear that he [the traveler] doth not change his country manners, for those of foreign parts" (Bacon).

own husband, Hormoz, who then coerces her into telling Moody about Betty's plan to run away:

He [Hormoz] told me that I have to tell Moody because it is my Islamic duty. If I don't tell him and something happens to you and Mahtob, then it is my sin, just like I killed you. I have to tell him. (182)

Even though, as Walker believes, Helen's betrayal of Betty's confidence is sure to incite the American audience (86), it is far from unexpected, since she has already committed a double-betrayal: Helen's marriage to an Iranian is cast as a betrayal of her nationality and patriotism, but more significantly her conversion to Islam is presented as a betrayal of her religion, and even her soul. For Betty, this is another sign of Helen's irremediable transgression and having become too Muslim, too Iranian, and too untrustworthy.

Mahmoody's account of Iranian women is informed by one major negation. There is a total absence in Mahmoody's account regarding the significant role of Iranian women who actively participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and during the Iraqi war to which Mahmoody makes numerous references. Once again, the social, political, and historical agency and subjectivity of Iranian women is negated, eliminated, denied, or distorted. This omission becomes more marked when judged against Betty's claim that she has been closely following, along with her husband in the U.S., the news of the Islamic Revolution and how it unfolded. As the many pictures of Iranian women participating in demonstrations against the Shah, which are easily accessible online, would prove, it was women like the ones described in Mahmoody's account (and not the Westernized, upper class elite) who actively participated in the Revolution and later in the defense against Iraq.

### **Willing Convicts Vs. Western Rebels**

As evident in discussions of different characteristics of Iranian people so far, Mahmoody's descriptions are informed by the establishment of an essentially different Western counterpart posited against its Iranian Other. Hence, characteristically, her representations of Iranian

women are interspersed with those of Betty and other 'white' women. In her pioneering study on the role of perceptions about white women in the history of racism, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (1992), Vron Ware identifies the three recurring categories of "the Good", "the Bad", and "the Foolhardy" under which white female characters in Orientalist and colonialist texts can be accommodated (232). The Good white woman emblemizes a moral opposition and resistance to any kind of tyranny and injustice. Like similar decent and virtuous characters in literature, especially female characters, a predictably unfortunate destiny of suffering awaits the morally upright woman, as she finds it beyond her powers to change the system in which she lives. Eventually, injustice prevails and the Good woman is subsequently subjugated by it.

The second type of white woman, the Bad, can, in a manner of speaking, be compared to what Malcolm X termed "the House Negro", the black slave who worked in the house and therefore enjoyed a higher quality of life than "the field Negro" who worked on the plantation (Mamdani 657). The House Negro, thus, was potentially more likely to uphold the apartheid power structures founded upon ubiquitous racism and discrimination against his fellow people of color. The Bad white woman can be the exact opposite of the Good in that her codes of morality are rooted in self-interest and opportunism, rather than in moral integrity and ethical principles. She may detest the climate and the people surrounding her but she makes the most of the privileged position she enjoys through her marriage to a colored man who in turn facilitates her access to trappings of power, wealth, position, and class.

The third kind of white woman recurring in Oriental/colonial discourses is what Ware describes as the Foolhardy. In the context of this discussion, they often start as hapless victims of abusive husbands who batter and betray them. However, as De Hart has argued, this victimhood is a corollary of the women's earlier self-victimization through their misjudgment, since they "dabbled in marriage with an oriental man" (thus breaking the taboo of their own society) and, after all, "married this man voluntarily", disregarding the fact that "since western and eastern cultures do not mix, problems are unavoidable" (57).

The Foolhardy are, nevertheless, beyond mere unwitting victims. Victimized as they might be through both their own judgment and their husbands' viciousness, they do not often linger in their predicament and move on to evince the heroism that distinguishes them from both other Western women and 'servile' Oriental Muslim women. They are portrayed as proactive, resilient, imbued with a spirit of resistance, survival, and hope, and create opportunities out of the most improbable and precarious situations. The Foolhardy woman is a non-conformist, if not a rebel, who displays staunch feminist proclivities. She is adamant in breaking the taboos of both Western and Oriental societies where she lives or is "trapped". This iconoclasm turns out to either have disastrous consequences for her – as her conduct "threatens to upset the whole system" (Ware 232) – or miraculously save her from her predicament. Therefore, apart from "God's grace", it is the Foolhardy woman's bravery, venturesomeness, and tenacity that guarantees her salvation after she has undergone the plight imposed on her by the Oriental brute. Moreover, the Foolhardy is the ideal figure through which to represent the America's key ideas of overcoming, independence, self-reliance, and individuality – the capitalized virtues of American identity.

In this light, one could argue that Betty, and her kindred souls in similar stories in her second book, exemplify Ware's Foolhardy. They are victims of both their own decisions and a man often cast as a deranged husband. These victim-turned-heroines, however, always manage to evoke the readers' sympathy immediately<sup>34</sup> as they are often presented as if plunged headlong into their predicament with no prior warning about the trials and tribulations of intermarriage, especially when the cultures are presented as the extreme opposites, and could thus be forgiven for their "mistake". Even if they *were* cautioned against such courtships, they could not be expected to act any more judiciously as they were often blinded by an exotic love, "lost in his dark, piercing eyes" (De Hart 57). If the Foolhardy's miscalculation calls for her punishment, it is through the same punishment, which often manifests itself in the form of

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<sup>34</sup> One could argue that the success of the text for an American audience is guaranteed to the extent to which the text successfully repeats the narratives its readers *already know*. In this context, the colonial and Orientalist discourses are the mechanisms of this reiteration.

imprisonment, a child custody battle in parental abduction narratives, or a combination of both, through which the Foolhardy displays her unwavering steadfastness and dedication. It is the same perseverance and loyalty that distinguishes the Western Foolhardy from the docility and inaction of her Oriental/Muslim counterparts.

Milani maintains that women like Betty in *NWMD* portray themselves in a totally different light from their Oriental peers:

Far from being willing convicts, passive victims in need of special and persistent deprogramming from abroad, they succeed in tearing down walls, pushing against the boundaries that contain them, making frontiers vanish, bearing witness to the hitherto unspoken, sprouting wings, flying through their texts. ("On Women's Captivity in the Islamic World" 42)

Iranian women, on the other hand, appear to be nothing but objects of what Said has called "a male power-fantasy" (*Orientalism* 208), playthings at the hands of the dominant, tyrannical males, and lifeless puppets whose strings are tugged from above.

Betty insists that even Iranian men themselves are aware of this difference between Western and Iranian women. Betty recounts how Moody "bubbled with obvious pride over his American wife" (13). The local supermarket owner can also distinguish between Betty's prudent domestic economy and the profligacy of Iranian women, complementing "You are the best woman in Iran. Most Iranian women are wasteful" (273).

In *NWMD*, Iranian women never react to their own or to each other's brutalization nor do they do anything to change or prevent it. There are many passages in the book in which Iranian women talk about how their husbands beat them; in all cases these women are portrayed as simply defenseless and incapable of doing anything to prevent or mollify their husbands. In the passages where Betty is beaten by Moody at their daughter's school in front of all the teachers and staff, the women stand idly by, only watching and doing nothing to defuse

the situation: "All of these women were powerless against the wrath of a single invading man" (168), Mahmoody reports. The image of submission, therefore, is complete.

Betty, however, seems to be radically different. She fights back, defies Moody when she can, and does everything in her power to make her way out of such situations. She devises plans, uses her head, cultivates relationships, seizes every opportunity that arises and is constantly seeking ways to break the chains that shackle her. When incarcerated within the confines of her house, or that of her husband's relatives, she persistently tries every possible way of breaking out of the house. When she fails to break free, she tries communicating with people outside, to ask for their help or notify them of her incarceration. In contrast to the Foolhardy Betty stands Helen, the Bad white woman. Helen, who has apparently been afflicted with the malaise of 'going native', is immersed into the fabric of Iranian society and, as was discussed earlier, has committed multiple betrayals, the last of which is her betrayal of Betty's secret. For Betty, her assimilation is no different from the betrayal of her American values.

It is not only the adults who are subjected to such Orientalist binaries; even Iranian children yet uninitiated into the adult world, and not yet belonging to any particular faith or value system, are portrayed in condescending language with strong racist and white supremacist overtones. Mahtob, the "American" child, is just a chip off the old block. She exudes extraordinary tenacity, resilience, and bravery, and her precocious understanding and discretion is way beyond a five-year-old girl. Mahmoody makes sure no one misidentifies her daughter with Iranian children of her age just because she has an Iranian father. As much as Mahtob's Iranian peers are sickly-looking, "vacant-eyed", "deformed" (103), boisterous, dirty, and ill-behaved, she is gorgeous, vibrant, wise, resilient, unyielding; she is, in one word, "American". Her "level of understanding" never ceases to "amaze" Betty when she tells her mother that she definitely wants to go back to America (365). Also, just like Betty, Moody has failed to shatter Mahtob's resistance and hope: "Moody had not beaten Mahtob into submission. Her spirit was bent, but not broken. She was not a dutiful Iranian child. She was my resolute American daughter" (361).



In an interview with Mahmoody, the notable German magazine *Der Spiegel*, ("Wir Haben Gemeinsam Geatmet") summarized what hitherto has been discussed regarding the juxtaposition of the white Western man, woman, and child respectively with their Oriental counterparts. The people juxtaposed stand for entire cultures, religions, nations, and even such enormously controversial and general entities as West and East. The West is represented as standing for wisdom, courage, and sagacity while the East is couched in all-too-familiar stereotypes of mystery, threat, and the fear of the unknown:

She [Betty] is the pure West. She is brave, wise at the right time, crying at the humiliation and cold-blooded only when necessary. Her husband is the dark mystery, whose change from American into Iranian resembles the change from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. (52)

### **The Villain Writes Back**

In 2002, a much-belated documentary *Without My Daughter* was produced by the Finnish director, Alexis Kouros, who set out to uncover the truth behind Mahmoody's story and give voice to Betty Mahmoody's husband's side of the story. The aim of the 90-minute documentary, according to Kouros, was to reveal the mendacity in the American film and present the real story behind what turned into an acrimonious custody battle for Mahtob Mahmoody. The documentary transcends the emotional yearning of a father seeking to revisit his daughter and probes the wider political and global contexts that complicate the case. In order to paint a fuller picture and counterpoise the sensationalism of the story, Kouros said he accumulated evidence in both Iran and the U.S. Nevertheless, he complained that Betty Mahmoody was uncooperative and suspected that she prevented attempts at getting in contact with the daughter.

The documentary is significant in many ways. Firstly, it provides a new lens into the much-publicized story of Betty Mahmoody, which raises significant questions about the authenticity of many of Mahmoody's allegations. Interviews with some of Mahmoody's friends

in Iran, as well as Betty Mahmoody's refusal to clarify major inconsistencies in the story raise serious doubts about the veracity of her story. Alice Sharif, an American friend of Betty's living with her Iranian husband in Tehran, for instance, has refuted many of Betty's accusations against both Iranian people and American women living in Iran at the time:

We were friends but she did write several lies about me here in this book. And not just about me but many of the American women or the foreign women that live here. They were very upset with Betty for writing such a book. If my country and Iran have more than twenty years of no relations, her book and her film serve to only make the situation worse instead of to help the situation.

She further rejects Mahmoody's claims of being incarcerated in her house and remembers that Betty was "free to go out any time that I called her on the phone". She also disputes Mahmoody's claim that she managed to escape Iran through the mountains to Turkey. Similarly, Malek Sharif, a family friend of the Mahmoody's, while refuting many of the claims in the book states that "if you wanna write a book and if you wanna make money in the States you have to sensationalize it and that sells". However, the most significant and revealing interview in the documentary is the one with the judge involved with the child custody case. Patrick Reed Joslyn, Circuit Court Judge, does concur that Dr. Mahmoody "didn't even know he was divorced until it was over and done with". When questioned if Mahmoody's treatment would had been different had he been the citizen of a different country, such as Canada, the judge responds

As far as the court is concerned, oh no, never. Not in my court. I would never allow any kind of, as we might say, xenophobia, fear, or prejudice, or bias. Mr. Mahmoody would have received the red carpet treatment in my courtroom.

What is yet extraordinary, and indeed, very revealing of Dr. Mahmoody's treatment in the American judicial system is the judge's subsequent statements about the case, when he vents his true feelings about both Mahmoody and Iranians:

Then the next question is where is he in the spectrum? Is he one of these rabid fundamentalists that hates Americans? You remember the ones that took control of the Embassy? They abused American citizens. Now it's interesting from an American standpoint. I was in the military. If I were in control of this country there'd be a lot of dead Iranians. And it's not civilized and it's a terrible way of conducting business, but that seems to be the only way you can deal with these irrational folks. They don't believe in the law, international law. They believe in this terrible violence that you see. I have a bad picture painted of jihad and Hezbollah and maybe it's fashioned by our own media because we do have a lot of Jews in the media and controlling the information that comes to the United States.

The quotation highlights the judge's racism and his ignorance, such as when he mentions Hezbollah, a Lebanese, not Iranian, militia group, and jihad, a concept that in the American sense of it is totally irrelevant to the divorce and custody in question. It is also quite ironic (as in the claim to give Dr. Mahmoody a red carpet welcome, and what actually happened to him) Furthermore, it highlights the contamination of what was a merely judicial decision about a private, familial case with emotionally induced politics and the jingoism prevalent at the time of the court's ruling. The judge's statements are significant from various perspectives. They exemplify how indelible the effect of the Hostage Crisis remains to this date and how it has come to shape both the policies of the United States and the public opinion towards Iran. It also signifies the underlying American exceptionalism in the collective identity of the U.S., as exemplified both in the judge's "They abused American citizens" as well as his disregard and apathy both for the hostile U.S. policies against Iranians in general and the injustice done to Dr. Mahmoody, in particular. Furthermore, it illustrates the extent to which Orientalism can shape the 'civilized world's' perception of its Other. Finally, the quotation highlights, as the judge confesses, the power of American media, and its rather monolithic structure, in demonizing countries or religions deemed antagonistic to the U.S.

In December 2013 *Lost Without My Daughter* by Sayed Mahmoody (Betty's ex-husband) was published posthumously (Mahmoody passed away in 2009) by an obscure London-based

publisher, “Thistle Publishing”. The back cover of *Lost Without My Daughter* describes the book as “the last-ditch attempt of a father desperate to reach his daughter, to let her know that he is not the monster he has been portrayed to be”. That the book has been published some 26 years after *NWMD* could perhaps be attributed to the reluctance of Western publishers (as well as a Western readership) to invest in the unpromising account of a Muslim Iranian man demonized beyond redemption. Unsurprisingly, Sayed Mahmoody’s account has incurred the outrage of incredulous Western readers<sup>35</sup> – convinced of his mendacity and ruthlessness. Except for the few fulminating reader reviews on Amazon,<sup>36</sup> it seems the book has never been reviewed; it does not appear in any major online book database (such as Google Books or WorldCat) and has not been cited. While establishing the truth value of Betty Mahmoody’s memoir (not to be confused with its myriad historico-political inaccuracies) and the response to it is an exercise in futility, the comparison of the two books’ receptions is a telling indicator of the hegemony not only of Orientalist narratives that best satisfy readers’ expectations but also the corporate media that has the power to propagate one account and stifle another.

At the end, no matter how superficial or propagandistic, cross-cultural narratives often speak volumes about the mindset, traditions, and the power structure that make their production, propagation, and reception possible. Even though they often go to extremes to paint a monolithic picture of the Other, more often than not they end up problematizing the very reductionist *modus operandi* through which they operate, thus destabilizing the dichotomous constructions upon which they are founded. As Colley has argued, “consciously or not, they almost always make clear by some incident, or passage, or giveaway line, that difference is not absolute, and that identities are invariably insecure” (206). In capitalizing on what Mahmoody sees as Iranian religious fanaticism, wittingly or unwittingly, she brings to light the white, Western religious chauvinism that informs her work. In a similar fashion, Mahmoody’s vituperations on Iran’s legislation and judicial system are undermined by her

<sup>35</sup> A short video of Dr. Mahmoody’s final remarks about his daughter recorded four months before his death (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrMf0Lfxbe8>) and the Finnish documentary (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W2SUn1ZNU0>) have suffered a similar fate as that of Sayed Mahmoody’s book.

<sup>36</sup> Available at: <http://www.amazon.com/Lost-Without-Daughter-Sayed-Mahmoody/dp/1909869791>

experience of, and disappointment with, the American judicial system, when seeking custody of their daughter (Mahmoody and Dunchock 44), not to mention by the judge's unabashed racism demonstrated above.

Cross-cultural narratives can provide excellent grounds for cross-fertilization, for mutual understanding, and for reimagining the deeply-entrenched Others. They are, alas, hardly ever employed to that end. As far as *NWMD* is concerned, the book only "helped to incite racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-Iranian feelings across Europe and North America" (Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 227). With the United States' need for new 'enemies', captivity narratives have gathered tremendous momentum, reappearing and being widely propagated, often in times of political tension. Hence, it should come as no surprise that at a time when tensions are high between Iran and the United States, a three-decade old story of captivity – that of the Hostage Crisis – appears afresh in a Hollywood disguise in the film *Argo* (2012), and wins the Oscar Award, reiterating much of what *NWMD* epitomizes. Also, perhaps the fact that the Oscar was awarded by Michelle Obama from the White House speaks volumes about the relationship between power and the discourse of Orientalism. This is yet another testament to Orientalism's protean nature and to the fact that, like the 'power' that enables it and is reinforced by it, Orientalism as a discourse never perishes – neither do captivity narratives; They only reincarnate when the time is ripe.

## Chapter Three

### ***Reading Lolita in Tehran: Opening Neo-Orientalism's Pandora's Box***

If Edward Said dismantled the edifice of Orientalism, Azar Nafisi is recruited to re-accredit it. (Dabashi "Native Informers")

In the preceding chapter, *Not Without My Daughter* was analyzed as “the mother of neo-Orientalist best-sellers”, a designation that, more than anything else, signifies the seminal role that Mahmoody’s book played in rejuvenating Orientalist narratives of captivity in foreign lands. When in March 2003, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*<sup>1</sup> by Azar Nafisi was published to exceptional international plaudits, and met with an *éclat* unprecedented for any Iranian-American writer, it was as if *Not Without My Daughter* had not only made a comeback, but had finally given birth to its rightful heiress, as it were, some 16 years after its initial publication. On the one hand, *RLT* descends from the lineage of the memoirs and captivity narratives on Iran revived in earnest by the success of Mahmoody’s book. On the other, it can be regarded as the quintessence of 21<sup>st</sup>-century neo-Orientalist autobiographical narratives published in the post-9/11 climate, as this trend-setter presaged the unprecedented upsurge in neo-Orientalist memoirs by expatriate Iranian-American women<sup>2</sup> (Marandi 179) and remains the iconic Iranian-American memoir hitherto (Whitlock "From Tehran" 8). With this in mind, then, it is little wonder that *RLT* bears striking thematic and representational similarities to *Not Without My Daughter*, which is indicative of the internal consistency of Orientalist discursive practices underlying such narratives.

What, however, differentiates *RLT* from Mahmoody’s memoir is a twofold distinction. The first distinction is the role of the authorial self in the narration of the story. Even though both authors enjoy the ‘privilege’ of access to the ‘Oriental’ world of their Iranian/Muslim Others, Nafisi’s account is distinguished by a ‘native’ element, which solidifies the authenticity

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, the title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* will henceforth be abbreviated as *RLT*.

<sup>2</sup> There are about 30-odd memoirs about post-revolutionary Iran published in the past decade most of which were, in one way or another, influenced by the success of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

and the truth value of her narration for her Western audience.<sup>3</sup> The other difference stems from the content of the narratives, which originates from the totally different backgrounds of the authors. While *Not Without My Daughter* is the co-product of Betty Mahmoody and her popular-fiction ghost writer, *RLT* is the artifact of someone well-versed in Western literature, literary narrative, and rhetorical strategies. Hence, while Mahmoody's memoir deals largely with the mundane details of everyday life offering a starkly black-and-white picture, *RLT* capitalizes on the more sophisticated and controversial questions of politics, gender roles, arts, and literature. Hence, in the ensuing discussions, a feminist reading of *RLT* – particularly that of the veil trope – and the nexus between literature and hegemony will be offered.

### Synopsis

Before any discussion of *RLT*'s representational *modus operandi*, it is indispensable to provide a succinct synopsis of the memoir. Unlike *Not Without My Daughter*, *RLT* does not follow a linear, unfolding story line. Essentially, the book chronicles Azar Nafisi's time in Tehran, Iran's capital, in the post-Islamic Revolution era, from 1979 to 1997. The book interlaces many significant historical junctures and landmarks in the post-Revolution Iran, such as the trajectory of the Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War,<sup>4</sup> the author's recollections of teaching Western literature to Iranian students at different Iranian universities, her alleged expulsion and eventual resignation, and most importantly the experience of women under the new political system. The overarching narrative framework of the text is a private literature class that Nafisi conducted 'clandestinely' with seven of "her best and most committed students" (1). From the fall of 1995 – after resigning from her last academic position – to 1997, Nafisi met with her students in her own apartment to discuss what she describes as "forbidden" classic Western literature. The class, therefore, serves as a microcosm lying at the heart of the memoir and allegedly provides a lens through which the reader can supposedly peer into the inner workings of Iranian society, culture, politics, and religion. In the course of the class, personal narratives of

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of the most significant elements that distinguishes neo-Orientalist narratives from their classical precedents, which will be further elaborated in the chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Also known as the First Persian Gulf War (September 1980 to August 1988).

Nafisi's "girls"<sup>5</sup> – as she affectionately calls them in her memoir – are interlaced with the journeys and fates of characters in the works of such canonical authors as Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen. It is mostly through the medium of this weekly class that Nafisi's responses to the events in Iran are articulated.

## Reception

The phenomenal success of Nafisi's memoir is reliant on a variety of political, temporal, literary, and cultural factors and, hence, reducing its runaway success to a singular cause risks oversimplification. Any thorough discussion of Nafisi's memoir and its reception also requires familiarity with the geopolitical as well as the cultural context of its production and the wave of Iranian-American memoirs of the last two decades. While the earlier, pre-9/11 Iranian-American memoirs and their reception were mostly driven by a public inquisitiveness in the West about the 1979 Islamic Revolution, interest in the recent genre of female memoirs has been aroused by the public's growing appetite for and curiosity about the perceived threat of 'Islamic fundamentalism' in the post 9/11 atmosphere. Against this backdrop, Amy Malek has related the popularity of the genre to the Western public's "seek[ing] insight into a country and a people that have been deemed "evil" and an imminent threat to Western society" (362).

It was both in the post-9/11 atmosphere and against the backdrop of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq<sup>6</sup> that *RLT* was released and soon became the number one paperback bestseller on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than 117 weeks. According to Nafisi's website, the book has been translated into 32 languages<sup>7</sup> and has won numerous literary awards including "the 2004 Non-fiction Book of the Year Award from Booksense, the Frederic W. Ness Book Award, the 2004 Latifeh Yarshater Book Award, an achievement award from the American

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that Nafisi refers to her students as her "girls", in fact, reinforces the idea that she sets herself up as a mother to her students. This becomes more significant in the context of the 'feminizing' tendency of Orientalism and especially given the intermediary role of the narrator as a model/mother for her "girls".

<sup>6</sup> *RLT* was released in March 2003 in the United States, a few months after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq on the pretext of Iraq's stockpile of weapons of mass destruction.

<sup>7</sup> The book was never translated into Persian/Farsi, though, notwithstanding Nafisi's Iranian origin and the fact that almost the entire book recounts her life in Iran. As discussed in the Introduction, this is one of the denominators of almost all neo-Orientalist Iranian-American narratives.



Immigration Law Foundation, as well as being a finalist for the 2004 PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Memoir" ("Azar Nafisi Website"). Also, in 2006 Nafisi was awarded a Persian Golden Lioness Award for literature, presented by the World Academy of Arts, Literature, and Media. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *RLT* was cited as the second most read book on American college campuses after *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by April 2004 ("What They're Reading on College Campuses") and by September of the same year it ranked fifth on the list of the most borrowed nonfiction books across the United States ("Lj Bestsellers"). The memoir quickly became "a classic work, anthologized in the second edition of the popular college textbook *The New Humanities Reader*" (Rowe 257). The tremendous success of the book was followed by "universal rave reviews from even the most feared of book critics" (DePaul "Re-Reading" 74) for more than a year after the publication of the book, offering overwhelmingly enthusiastic appraisals of the book's form and content (Mailloux 25).

At first glance, *RLT* is more than anything else a story about women and reading, or rather the story of women reading. It is, therefore, only too justified that the phenomenal success of Nafisi's memoir is often attributed to the two major leitmotifs of the narrative, i.e., the representation of women and (reading canonical Western) literature. In her memoir, Nafisi promotes a kind of universalist liberal-humanist approach to literature, exemplified in her "knack for dramatizing literature's transcendent values" which, as Richard Byrne has argued, "brought robust sales for her memoir" ("A Collision" 9). Furthermore, the memoir's narration of life narratives of women, especially when they are presented as both exotic and victimized, appeals to many Western readers. Like her literary ideology, Nafisi's version of feminism is equally informed by a universalism that overlooks the complexities, heterogeneities, and differences of sociohistorical situations of women in the non-Western world. This latter question (of women) itself owes much to the truth claim about the Iranian/Muslim Other made by the memoir and corroborated by scores of enthusiastic Western reviewers. As Rowe has duly observed, "the book's popularity in the West has much to do with readers' desires to understand the authenticity of Iranian women" (260).

From a rather similar vantage point, *RLT* is a narrative revolving around a women's book club.<sup>8</sup> As such, understanding its phenomenal success is contingent upon awareness of the fact that the memoir's release was concurrent with the phenomenon of female book clubs and reading groups starting in the 1990s, largely instigated by such factors as Oprah Winfrey's nationwide book club launched in 1996 (DePaul "Re-Reading" 73; Malek 365). In a study published contemporaneously with *RLT*, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003), Elizabeth Long estimates that in the United States alone, there are between five to ten million female book club members (1). This book club vogue led to the publication of reader's guides by almost all major publishers as well as the promotion of authors by providing their biographies on their websites and by connecting the readers and authors by setting up conference calls (DePaul "Re-Reading" 73). On the website of *RLT*'s publisher<sup>9</sup> – Random House – as well as on Nafisi's own website,<sup>10</sup> the author's biography appears next to extensive accolades for the book and the Reader's Guide, which includes discussion questions, suggestions by the author herself, and an extensive Teachers' Guide or Note to Teachers. In this light, one could argue that the memoir seems to be preceded by its own heuristic apparatus, which is to say, the book is already 'read' for the reader. With this in mind, it should not come as a surprise, then, that a memoir about the liberating power of literature with an all-female book club as its narrative centerpiece should be so enthusiastically received in the U.S., especially as word-of-mouth recommendations by readers, book store owners, and book clubs alike have "exponentially amplif[ied] the buzz" surrounding it (Abbott).

Besides the rise of the book club phenomenon in the West, *RLT* owes its success to the popularity of the memoir as a literary genre, especially when it is an essentially female memoir (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 623; DePaul "Re-Reading" 74). In conjunction with this reason is the book's championing of feminist values and support for the women's cause (Bahramitash

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<sup>8</sup> As such, it the book offers a metatextual commentary on reading, and perhaps attempting to frame the reading of the overall book through the readings depicted; It is also somewhat prepackaged and the text is very "readerly" in the Barthesian sense – that is, the reader is encouraged to read in a formulaic, unquestioning manner.

<sup>9</sup> Accessible at <http://www.randomhouse.com/book/119522/reading-lolita-in-tehran-by-azar-nafisi>

<sup>10</sup> Accessible at <http://azarnafisi.com/>

"The War on Terror" 230). Furthermore, as critics have pointed out, the memoir's elicitation of reader empathy for the characters – reinforced through its highly selective portrayal of Iranian women's lives – has also contributed to its public reception (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 624). In keeping with the book's treatment of the "Woman Question" in Iran, critics have argued that the book's affirmation of established preconceptions and the (Orientalist) ideological perspective that Western audiences have come to expect from women in Muslim countries has played a major role in *RLT*'s popularity (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 112; Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 624; Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 221). As a text emphasizing the role, and ascendancy, of Western literature, some critics have partially attributed its success to its literary merits (Malek 365; Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 624) and to "a nonfiction storyline that works off beloved literary classics"<sup>11</sup> (DePaul "Re-Reading" 74). Being well-versed in American and English literatures, Nafisi draws on various narrative techniques, creates and maintains suspense throughout the memoir, and often addresses the reader directly for effect and more empathetic engagement, and invites the reader to "imagine" the characters' "plight":

I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't. Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us. (6)

The excerpt serves several simultaneous functions: it emphasizes that the story is written for the intended Western readership, so demanding their personal engagement with the narrative; it reaffirms that it is a story of women's "most private and secret moments", thus arousing the readers' curiosity, if not Orientalized fantasy; and it confirms the Western readers' expectations

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<sup>11</sup> It should, however, be noted that Nafisi's memoir is characterized by a problematic blurring of distinctions between fiction and non-fiction (i.e. the 'real-life' significance of fiction and the fictional casting of the real-life, except that Nafisi's unilateral reading of the canonical texts is dubious and her own writing also manipulates 'reality' to fit into stereotype devices and fictions).

of life in Iran as an allegedly undemocratic, fundamentalist, and fanatical state that usurps its denizens' "most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life".

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant factors in the reception of any work of art is the historico-political juncture out of which it emerges. As far as *RLT* is concerned, it is not by mere coincidence that the memoir was published in March 2003, eighteen months after 9/11 and while the U.S. was waging yet another war against Iraq (Koegeler 33; Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 623; Grogan 54). In the aftermath of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, *RLT* catered to the mass curiosity about the Muslim Other – more than ever propagated in the public discourse as the United States' principal foe – and the status of women inhabiting those countries (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 112; Malek 365). Besides the foregoing reasons for the book's success and appeal, one can also refer to such other reasons as the overwhelming number of rave reviews published in American journals and newspapers as well as Nafisi's active participation in numerous talks and interviews to promote her memoir (DePaul "Re-Reading" 74).

### Reader Responses

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* was not only popular in the immediate time and context of its publication. A quick survey of online book clubs, forums, and bookstores would confirm the fact that *RLT* still continues to enjoy overwhelming popularity with the Western readers.<sup>12</sup> Investigating reader responses to *RLT* sheds light on the extent to which the neo-Orientalism embedded in the text has been successful in shaping the Western/American readers' perceptions of the Iranian/Muslim Other. In her analysis of online reviews based on book club discussions and personal reading experiences discussed in literary forums, Koegeler concludes that the predominant trends across the blogs are a testament to the fact that "exotic qualities sell and they are in turn what fuels neoliberal multiculturalism" (35). Succinctly put, Neoliberal multiculturalism refers to the ideology of neoliberal political economic reforms (via a laissez-

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<sup>12</sup> If the user ratings are any indication, the memoir enjoys an average rating of almost 4 out of 5 on such popular and widely-used online communities of book enthusiasts as *goodreads*, *Google Books*, and *Amazon*.

faire economic liberalism promoting free trade and privatization) with an appreciation of a multiculturalism deemed indispensable for the globalizing endeavors inherent to free-market expansion. Nevertheless, while neoliberal multiculturalism purports to be a diversity-oriented ideology, it only authorizes a “superficial ‘integration’ of certain kinds of diversity without deconstructing present ethnic and cultural hierarchies” (Koegeler 35). Milton Fisk has best explained that the “paradox” of neoliberal multiculturalism is that while

There is a growing recognition of different cultures ... at the same time, there is a clear affirmation of the limits on that recognition; so, the state will not allow recognition to spill over into an effort to have equality of a form that would run counter to the economic norms the regime is expected in the global context to protect. (22)

Thus, while the publication and reception of such books as *RLT* can be read as part of the multicultural zeitgeist of the time, this alleged multiculturalism is welcomed and promoted mostly because it both confirms the Orientalist assumptions of the Western reader about their Iranian Others and is also in line with the official policies of the United States –especially those of the neoconservatives – vis-à-vis Iran. The reception and performance of *RLT* within the context of neoliberal multiculturalism is further explored in Nafisi’s representations of Iranian women, her implicit juxtaposition of Iran and the West, and most importantly her association with neoconservative politics both in her personal affiliations and the content of *RLT*.

One of the major themes analyzed in the discussion forums is the memoir’s “enlightening” nature, its mind-opening quality, especially for Americans, which in turn necessitates for American readers further appreciation of “American freedom” as opposed to their “oppressed” Iranian counterparts (Koegeler 35). Not only do readers’ responses to the memoir reinforce the Orientalism embedded in the text, the reader often “co-produces the neo-orientalism enabled through the memoir” (Koegeler 35) which often leads to the affirmation of the imperial and colonial implications of the book. This co-production is enabled where the memoir conforms to certain Western assumptions about the Oriental Other, particularly apropos Iranian women. The prevalent Orientalism in readers’ reviews is

exemplified in such reviewer comments as “Either these women tell their stories to America now, or they may not be able to tell them at all”, which Koegeler regards as an instance of “the most blunt orientalist appropriation of the memoir to bolster US imperial perception of needing to save Muslim women” (36). Though there is occasionally a caveat in the reviews indicating that the author does not represent all Iranian women, the “enlightening” and “inspiring” values of the memoir apparently far outweigh such references.

In the analysis of reader responses, one conclusion drawn by one of the book clubs that Koegeler investigates is particularly illuminating. Nordeen Morello writes of the discussion of the memoir in the “Book-’Em” book club that the memoir “portrays a life, especially for women, that is almost beyond our comprehension. We thank both the author, Azar Nafisi, and our cultural interpreter, Farnaz Shemirani, for allowing us the opportunity to walk in someone else's shoes” (Morello). What cannot be overemphasized in the comment above is how Nafisi’s memoir has apparently made possible the paradox of representing, on the one hand, Iranian/Muslim women as incomprehensible, outlandish Others, while concurrently providing American readers with the opportunity to “walk in their shoes” or to experience what E. Ann Kaplan has called “vicarious trauma” (87), from within the sanctuary of their homes and from a safe, superior position. Koegeler has concluded that as long as auto-Orientalism is capable of creating and maintaining this paradox, “Nafisi buys her elite cosmopolitan status and gratitude of American readership by selling empathy under the imperial guise of Muslim women’s inferiority” (38).

Contrary to the reception of *Not Without My Daughter*, both the popular and academic feedback to *RLT* has been far from uncontested and unanimous. In fact, even though the majority of initial reviews and critiques after the publication of the book in 2003 were predominantly acclamatory, and quite uncritically so, subsequent scholarly critiques were of a more critical and in-depth nature. On the one hand, the extraordinary success of *RLT* in both the United States, and the Western literary market at large, has often been regarded as one of the primary reasons for the burgeoning of memoirs penned by female members of the Iranian diaspora (Marandi 179) and has, *ipso facto*, contributed to the ‘visibility’ of the Iranian-

American community, especially in the American literary arena. On the other hand, and *a fortiori*, the text has played a major role in the propagation of the dominant Irano-Islamophobic rhetoric in the United States against Iran by advocating an Orientalist perception of the country and catering to the anti-Muslim zeitgeist of the time. Hence, reading the text as the pioneer of the new Orientalist wave of memoirs on Iran in the new millennium is far from an overstatement. In other words, even though the book – as well as the celebrity status it earned its author – played a remarkable role in the publication of many more Iranian-American memoirs and contributed, by extension, to their authors' visibility, on a much larger scale, it fed into the prevalent demonization of Iran and Islam, particularly rampant in the post-9/11 era. In the United States, the book generated a contentious debate among American Muslim communities. Nevertheless, nowhere was the debate more vigorous than among the U.S.-based Iranian-American intelligentsia, where many scholars voiced their disapprobation of the book, contending that by engaging in such grotesque distortions of the post-Revolution Iranian landscape *RLT* both renders Iranians "subhuman" and hampers the intellectual give-and-take and intercultural entente (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 6). The controversy over the book peaked with the publication of Professor Hamid Dabashi's<sup>13</sup> *Native Informers and the Making of American Empire* in 2006, which will be elaborated in the subsequent sections.

### Auto-Orientalism

The remarkable similarities between *Not Without My Daughter* and *RLT*, products of two different historico-political junctures, attest to the dominance of hegemonic, time-honored, and deeply- entrenched Orientalist regimes of representation and ontological knowledge production about the construction of the Iranian/Muslim Other. Nevertheless, this is far from presuming that Orientalism exists and operates as a monolithic, homogeneous discourse, as this would mean falling into the trap of Orientalist reductionism. Rather, it attests to the existence of certain Orientalist strategies that interlace form and content together and produce familiar and similar effects and images.

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<sup>13</sup> Hamid Dabashi is an Iranian-American Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York City and a colleague and close friend of the late Edward Said .

The post-9/11 era witnessed a spate of memoirs about life in Middle Eastern countries authored predominantly by Western-based, diasporic members of the same societies. Even though female memoir writing is by now a well-established tradition in Western literature, the emergence of a large number of memoirs by women of Middle Eastern origin in a relatively short span is little short of a literary phenomenon. Paramount in this novel genre, however, is the appearance of a significant cluster of memoirs penned by Iranian-American writers. What binds the majority of such memoirs together is an Orientalist underpinning that informs the overall thematic and representational dynamics of such texts. Therefore, to distinguish the earlier Orientalist narratives from the more recent ones, which proliferated in the post-9/11 landscape, some scholars have designated the latter as “New/Neo-Orientalist”.<sup>14</sup> Professor Fatemeh Keshavarz,<sup>15</sup> has averred that the “New Orientalist” narrative of writing on Middle Eastern societies, epitomized by *RLT*, encourages the same reductionism and oversimplification of older narratives by forging a binary perception of the world, which, consequently, renders it “as silencing as its predecessor authored by the nineteenth-century European Orientalists” (*Jasmine and Stars* 2).

Despite their many essential similarities, there are several characteristic features of neo-Orientalist narratives that distinguish them from both their classical predecessors and more recent texts as *Not Without My Daughter*.<sup>16</sup> Chief among these features is the authorial perspective, or the “eyewitness” or “testimonial” narrative modus operandi, which, in turn, raises significant questions of authority and authenticity: while texts such as *Not Without My Daughter* are produced by a Western “outsider” – even though the authors often posit themselves as insiders privy to the peculiarities of the Other’s culture – the recent narratives

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<sup>14</sup> Both “New Orientalist” and “neo-Orientalist” have been proposed by scholars to refer to the recent literary manifestations of Orientalism. However, to emphasize the continuity between contemporary and classical modes of Orientalism, the term “neo-Orientalism” would be used in this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Professor Keshavarz is an Iranian-American professor of comparative literature at the University of Maryland and the Roshan Chair of Persian Studies and director of the [Roshan Institute at University of Maryland](#).

<sup>16</sup> These distinguishing features were discussed at length in the Introduction chapter of this dissertation.



are mostly written from the “insider” perspective of authors who, at least partially, belong to the country, culture, and religion they describe.<sup>17</sup>

In their discussion of the neo-Orientalism underlying the post-9/11 Middle Eastern memoir trend, Behdad and Williams contend that “not only do Middle Eastern writers, scholars, and so-called experts participate in it, but they play an active and significant role in propagating it”, especially as their “self-proclaimed authenticity sanctions and authorizes their discourses” (284). Such representations, therefore, are expected to impart more authenticity, originality, and more in-depth ‘insider’ knowledge of the allegedly omniscient author as they often demonstrate “awareness of the power of personal voice, nostalgia in exilic literature, the assurance that comes with insider knowledge and the certainty of eyewitness accounts” (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 4).<sup>18</sup> In other words, not only does the neo-Orientalist author engage in the systematic Othering of her fellow countrymen and women, she also inscribes her authorial self into the text and thus participates in and directs the discursive trajectory more effectively.

To highlight the “eyewitness” property of the new wave of Orientalist narratives, some scholars have branded such works as auto-Orientalist. Auto-Orientalism, therefore, can be considered a key component of neo-Orientalism, and one of the major distinctions between neo-Orientalism and its classical counterpart. A rather recently developed notion (compared to the age-old legacy of Orientalism), auto-Orientalism has remained relatively undertheorized. Be that as it may, several scholars have set out to sketch the concept within the frameworks of their own scholarly spheres. Lamont Lindstrom has most aphoristically defined auto-Orientalism as “self-discourse among orientals” (Carrier 36). In her influential study of

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<sup>17</sup> Ideas of “home”, “belonging”, and “identity” are relative and complex notions, especially in the postmodern era, the significance of which – particularly in the memoir genre – cannot be overemphasized, as they do exert a certain influence upon the text. However, the idea of belonging is used here in the literal sense of the word to denote the native origins of the author, since a more in-depth discussion of these ideas would diverge from the main discussion.

<sup>18</sup> It should be added that a tradition of native informants and apologists figure in some classical Orientalist accounts, too. However, these figures are not in the forefront of Orientalist production and their roles were mediated, and therefore, far less direct and personal.

*Argentine Orientalism and Arab Immigrants*, Christina Civantos has articulated auto-Orientalism as “the essentialization of the self based on preexisting archetypes” (22).

Similarly, in his study of “Japanese uniqueness”, John Lie discusses the proliferation of post-war Japanese auto-Orientalist writings as “Orientalist writings by Japanese about themselves” the preponderance of which “described various pitfalls of Japanese culture and society in the immediate postwar years” (5). Also, in his discussion of psycholinguistic Orientalism in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* (1976) and Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) Tomo Hattori argues that, contrary to Said’s major contention, the Orientalist controversy over the foregoing texts is “not about how the writer represents the other but how the writer represents herself and her cultural identity” (120). In other words, the Chinese and Japanese North American female authors just mentioned engage in a “unique case here of auto-Orientalism” that “necessitates an approach that can examine the relationship between the subject and her own linguistic construction of herself as a Chinese American female subject” (Hattori 120). Taking the context of Lie’s definition of auto-Orientalism as a case in point (the post-war Japan), one can argue that as a mode of representation, auto-Orientalism has been particularly current in the discursive practices of post-crisis societies or the ones emerging out of grand social paradigm shifts. This can, in large part, be attributed to both the ideological resistance to such massive social transformations, or a result of disillusionment with the post-crisis status quo.

Building on the argument, Edmund Burke and David Prochaska have also employed the definition of auto-Orientalism to frame Western representations of the West, arguing that along with Orientalist representations of the Other, the West

was quite as active in developing representations of itself, as of others. Indeed, we can say that Western civilization is the form of auto-Orientalism by which the West represented itself to itself, a form of self-blinding quite as destructive ultimately as any Orientalist representation of a non-Western society. (49)

As evident in all of the definitions offered, the authorial/representational “self”, signified by the prefix “auto”, distinguishes this later species of Orientalism from its forbears. It is fitting, however, to point out that notwithstanding the authorial self’s engagement in Orientalization of the native people of the society in question, she is careful not to implicate her own self as an exotic, or primitive Other. In fact, representing herself as belonging to, or at least being sufficiently well-versed in and *au courant* with the Other’s culture, and securing, *ipso facto*, the authenticity of her voice, the author inscribes herself into the narrative and her towering presence pervades the story’s entire structure. Yet, almost always, through self-exempting discursive strategies (paramount among them association with, or more accurately assimilation into the Western culture) she manages to stay aloof and exonerate herself from the Oriental ‘maladies’ imputed to the Others she represents, while simultaneously identifying herself with and within the Western context. In *RLT*, Nafisi manages to create this critical distance between herself and the ‘victimized’ Iranian women by making repeated references to her associations with the Western world. This is primarily achieved by her references to her life and education in the West and particularly in the U.S. (82). There are also many instances of the author’s self-referentiality in the text, which, more than anything else, highlight her associations with and fondness for Western culture. During the war years when Tehran was heavily bombarded by an Iraqi air force fully supported by Western powers, Nafisi sought solace in Western novels (186), films, and “Vishnovka, a homemade cherry vodka” (232). In one significant passage describing one of her “girls”, Yassi, Nafisi quotes her as saying “What seems natural to someone like you, she said, is so strange and unfamiliar to me”. Nafisi then speculates: “Could she ever live the life of someone like me, live on her own, take long walks holding hands with someone she loved, even have a little dog perhaps?” (32). Another significant reference to Nafisi’s ‘difference’ from the ‘oppressed’ Iranian women is her adamant refusal to wear the veil (152), which not only distinguishes Nafisi from those who did observe the veil, but also immediately identifies her with ‘free’, unveiled Western women. Thus, Nafisi distinguishes herself from the “black-scarved, timid faces in the city” through what “became a way of life” for her, that is “insubordination” (45). In a similar vein, Nafisi never misses an opportunity to create the same critical distance for anyone with Western leanings –quite similar to Mahmoody’s description of

Westernized Iranians – particularly her Western-influenced friends who are portrayed as the only worthy people she can associate with. Prominent among this group is a character she cryptically calls her “magician”, who uses “his British training” (281) when reasoning with her and her “sophisticated French-educated friend, Leyly” (265).

According to Melani McAlister, “the particular logic of Orientalism”, and by extension its derivatives neo- and auto-Orientalism, is contingent, among other things, upon the triumvirate characteristics of being “binary, feminized, and citational” (12). These principal characteristics neither exist in isolation nor can function individually; rather, they form a complex nexus of figurations and associations that work collaboratively and serve to reinforce one another so as to manufacture the ultimate Orientalist product. In effect, one could argue that the aforementioned features cannot exist and perform except symbiotically and reciprocally, that is, deploying the citational feature of Orientalism is only possible within the context of the West vs. East, superior vs. inferior binary, which will, in turn, reinforce the feminizing nature of Orientalism. In other words, citationality, that is, the citation of established Orientalist tropes such as the veil as the symbol of Muslim women’s backwardness and oppression, is predicated on an absolutist contrarianism (for instance the “free” Western woman vs. the “oppressed” Muslim one), in the context of which citation can be utilized as a representational strategy. Furthermore, employment of citationality leads, in turn, to the creation of a feminized image of the Other (i.e. weak, submissive, oppressed, sexually exotic, and the like), while simultaneously underpinning the binary context in which it functions.

The essence of the aforesaid principal features is transferred almost verbatim from antecedent classical Orientalist discourses to the more recent types of neo-Orientalism, even though the texts, contexts, and styles in which they are utilized remain dynamic and fluid. Thus, the same Orientalist representational strategies of citation, feminization, and binarism can be seen extensively at work in *RLT*. In other words, neo/auto-Orientalism is best understood as an ancillary to classical Orientalism, rather than as a *sui generis* entity. As Behdad and Williams have argued, “Although the term ‘neo-Orientalism’ designates a shift in the discourse of

Orientalism, that represents a distinct, and in ways novel formation, it nonetheless entails certain discursive repetitions of and conceptual continuities with its precursor” (284).

As far as acceptance, reception, and the marketing logistics are concerned, the hyphenated American author can gain the privilege of entrance into Western literary markets through the deployment of the auto-Orientalism that underlies such works as *RLT*. This, as Koegeler contends, is made possible more than anything else via the “citation of orientalist tropes”, which opens the door for the active participation of the minority author in the dominant discursive practices concerning Islam, Muslim womanhood, and Americanness and grants her “access to publication by way of its mutual legibility by majority discourses and minority writers” (iii). In the following exegesis of *RLT*, I will elaborate how by way of exploiting Orientalist citationality, that is through drawing on its most familiar and enduring tropes, the author portrays a phantasmagoric picture of post-revolutionary Iran, employing a neo-Orientalist discourse, which is as much “monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other” as classic Orientalist texts (Behdad and Williams 284).

In her discussion of post-9/11 Arab-American writing, Koegeler argues that the citationality of Orientalist tropes generates two types of auto-Orientalist discourses, namely, essentialist and strategic auto-Orientalism. It is, however, upon the essentialist type of auto-Orientalism – that is the deployment of established Orientalist tropes to represent the Other – that *RLT* has been constructed. Through calculated employment of essentialist auto-Orientalization, Nafisi performs a purely eastward gaze, rather than a simultaneously eastward and Westward gaze,<sup>19</sup> which only testifies to and solidifies American stereotypes of Muslim womanhood, among other things, rather than questioning them (Koegeler 31).

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<sup>19</sup> The idea is borrowed from Lisa Suhair Majaj’s notion of a simultaneously East and Westward gaze in her study of Arab-American writing (Majaj).

## The Front Cover

In order to better appreciate the production, reception, and consumption of any work of art or literature, its *paratextual* elements need to be examined. In his seminal *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), Gerard Genette defines paratexts as “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*), that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords” (xviii). The paratextual features of a text are often conditioned by the sociocultural and the political zeitgeist of the time of their production. Inasmuch as Iranian-American memoirs are concerned, perhaps the paramount feature of their *peritexts* (that is, whatever appears on and between the front and back covers of a book) is what Genette has dubbed “the outermost peritext”: the front cover (15).

The front covers of most Middle Eastern memoirs predominantly portray the image of an exotic Middle Eastern woman shrouded, to varying degrees, in a black veil. Such images readily resonate with the Western readers’ expectations of Muslim women as veiled and oppressed, and in need of being ‘saved’. Some Iranian-American memoirs that purport to be stories of female resistance and insubordination portray a more defiant practice of veiling (that is, in bright colors or scantily veiled), while still depicting an exotic – often dark-haired, dark-eyed – Oriental woman. Amongst this trend, the cover photo of *RLT* is an exception of sorts that complicates this established pattern, thus foreshadowing the complexities of Nafisi’s memoir compared to those of her fellow-Iranian-American memoirists.

Richard Byrne has suggested that “if there is one battleground that encompasses the complexities and competing claims of Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Hamid Dabashi’s attack upon it, it is the cover of the book” (“Peeking under the Cover”). All versions of *RLT*’s cover depict two teenage girls in their black headscarves standing shoulder to shoulder with their heads bent slightly downward apparently immersed in perusing something the knowledge of which is withheld from the reader. However, as right above the image (and in one edition below the girl’s faces) the words *Reading Lolita in Tehran* appear in big typeface, the

immediate suggestion is that they are immersed in reading Nabokov's *Lolita*, in a charming manner which "solicits sympathy, and even evokes complicity" (Dabashi "Native Informers"). The cover of *RLT*, therefore, symbolizes the two overarching questions of the text: women and literature.

The cover image thus becomes a site of hermeneutic contestation, prophetically foreshadowing the complex nexus of associations and insinuations that underpin the text. To begin with, the image of the two black-veiled young girls speaks to the oppression, silence, and even submissiveness of Iranian women. Ostensibly, what the cover image denotes is that the two young girls in the image – who, with hindsight, evoke Nafisi's "girls" – are reading Nabokov's *Lolita* in the city of Tehran. The connotation, however, is not as innocuous as what the image seems to denote. Rather, it is infused with Orientalist innuendo and allusion. For one thing, the cover photo is strongly, and perhaps nostalgically, too, reminiscent of the genre of the colonial postcards of exotic Oriental girls manufactured by and for the consumption of colonial officers, and by extension of imperial metropolitan centers' populace.<sup>20</sup>

There is, however, much more to the cover photo of *RLT* than meets the eye at first sight. The image of the teenagers apparently reading *Lolita* is, in fact, a case of what Dabashi has dubbed "an iconic burglary" ("Native Informers"). The image is, in effect, excised from a news report belonging to an entirely different context, covering the 2000 parliamentary election in Iran. Far from being oppressed Iranian Lolitas, the girls in the original image are reading not Nabokov's *Lolita* but the latest election updates from the leading reformist newspaper of the time, *Moshaarekat* (meaning, Participation) on what appears to be a college campus. In its manipulated format that appears on the cover of *RLT*, the image is cropped so the reader cannot see what the two young women are in fact reading, convinced by the title that they are indeed reading *Lolita*. By decontextualizing the image, by way of cropping not only what the girls are reading, but other female students behind the two teenagers, and most

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, Dabashi has gone as far as suggesting that the cover photo, connotes an "overtly Orientalised pedophilia" that, combined with the title of the memoir, would conjure up one of the most pleasing Orientalist clichés, i.e. the fantasy of illicit sex with Oriental Lolitas.

importantly a poster of the progressive then-President Mohammad Khatami – the embodiment of the reformist movement in Iran to date – Nafisi, or her publisher for that matter, have chosen to divest the girls of their individuality as well as “their moral intelligence and their participation in the democratic aspirations of their homeland, ushering them into a colonial harem” (Dabashi “Native Informers”). Nafisi has dismissed the criticism against the choice of her cover photo as outlandish, arguing that the girls simply “seem to be reading” and that the choice of the final cover is at the discretion of the publisher, not the author. However, one cannot concur more with Dabashi that even if one accepts Nafisi’s justification, “the cropping of Iranian culture that is done inside is even more insidious, and that is her writing” (Byrne “Peeking under the Cover”).

Cover photos of neo-Orientalist memoirs have significant marketing implications. In an interview Nafisi has claimed that she has advised the publisher of her memoir, Random House, against choosing an “exotic” cover photo and has rejected such suggestions as “to have a woman with Lolita glasses with a chador” (Byrne “Peeking under the Cover”). However, the image, which is professionally and effectively tailored – even though it may not seem overtly exotic at first glance – not only fulfills the demands of marketing strategies, but in fact achieves much more by engaging the reader’s curiosity and attention, promising a narrative which simultaneously corroborates their Orientalist conceptions of the Iranian Other while purporting to be intellectually rewarding for its literary discussions. However, as far as engaging the reader’s attention and meeting marketing demands are concerned, the title of the book tallies well with its cover image in significance and connotation. Rarely has the title of any neo-Orientalist memoir been so calculated, well-devised, reflective of the narrative content, and controversial, too.<sup>21</sup> To a significant extent, this is attributable to the author’s literary

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the title of many of the scholarly critiques written on *RLT* imitates the title of the memoir in one way or another. One can refer, for instance, to *Reading Nafisi in the West* (2006) by Mitra Rastegar; *Reading Lolita at Guantanamo* (2006) by Andrew Koppelman; *Jasmine and Stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran* (2007) by Fatemeh Keshavarz; *Reading and Misreading Lolita in Tehran* (2007) by Firoozeh Papan-Matin; *Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran in Idaho* (2007) by John Carlos Rowe; *Reading Lolita in Times of War* (2007) by Catherine Burwell; *Why Americans Love Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2008) by Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh; *Re-Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2008) by Amy DePaul; *Reading Azar Nafisi in the West* (2008) by Seyyed Mohammad Marandi; *Why Read Reading Lolita?* (2008) by Simon Hay; and *Reading Tehran in Lolita* (2011) by Jodi Melamed.



background and her linguistic expertise, contrary to the preponderance of neo-Orientalist memoirs that are produced either by unprofessional writers or ghost authors and literary aides.

Like the cover photo, the other outermost peritext of *RLT*, its title, signifies several concepts simultaneously. For one thing, one might ask: if Western classics are so tenably universal, as Nafisi and reviewers like Heather Hewett have suggested, what renders reading Nabokov's *Lolita* in the city of Tehran so conspicuous? As Keshavarz has rejoined, the title of the book "has an unmistakable undertone of Otherness to it" that renders the very act of reading Nabokov's novel in Tehran a curious and unlikely eventuality (*Jasmine and Stars* 22). True to the polarizing proclivity of (neo)Orientalist narratives the title suggests an Orientalist binarism from the very outset, thus juxtaposing the free, liberal West signified by *Lolita* with the Islamic theocracy and the Western trope of the oppressed Muslim woman symbolized by the word Tehran. From another perspective, Grogan has argued that *Lolita* serves as a "model text for exposing solipsists who deny their subjects humanity" (53). Against this backdrop, by conjuring up *Lolita*'s narrative and ineluctably her relationship with Humbert Humbert, Nafisi is inviting her readers to draw an analogy between the dynamics of the relationship between Ayatollah Khomeini and the people of Iran (Papan-Matin 31; Rowe 268). In this scheme of things, the concept of reading conjoins the gap, unbridgeable though it turns out to be from the story, between the two signifiers for both the teenagers who are shown reading Western classics in the memoir as well as the readership of *RLT*. Furthermore, as Donadey maintains, "The use of *Lolita* as an intertext sensationalizes Iranian women's situation; the title is shocking in an Iranian context and tantalizing in a western one" (632). Thus, taken together, the title and the cover illustration exert a dramatic effect: while the word *Lolita* in the title becomes a signifier conjuring up illicit sex with teenagers, the image of the scarf-donning Iranian teenagers evokes Oriental fantasies, thus attaching a "tantalising addition of an Oriental twist to the most notorious case of pedophilia in modern literary imagination" (Dabashi "Native Informers"). This, in turn, contributes to "the slick and predictable marketing package by catering to a western audience's expectations" (Abbott 106).

### Damsels in Distress: Reading Muslim “Lolitas” in the West

They [Persian women] are adopting our dress, they will get our education in a measure, perhaps our freedom to a certain extent. Shall they have our Christ? (Annie Woodman Stocking, *The New Woman in Persia*, 1912, p. 372)

No one can study the tragic story of women under the Muslim faith without an earnest longing and prayer that something may be done by the united Church of Christ to meet this need. We think with pity and sorrow of the veiled women of Islam. (Zwemer & Zwemer, *Muslim Women*, 1926, p. 5)

Since Azar Nafisi is both geographically and ideologically positioned in the West – especially in a country that deems itself under attack from ‘Islamic fundamentalism’– and because she is writing primarily for a Western and, in particular, American audience, it is indispensable to consider her geopolitical situatedness and the context in which the debates over the Muslim Other are taking place. One overarching concept at the heart of the debates surrounding Islam and its perceived fundamentalism is the question of women in Muslim and particularly Middle Eastern countries. The overriding theme in this discussion of Muslim women, who are almost always treated monolithically by Western political discourse, is their suppression and victimization by a chauvinistic, patriarchal religious dogma (Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 221).

In her discussion of postrevolutionary Iran, Nafisi focuses more than anything else on the Iranian “Woman Question”. In focusing on the status of women after the Revolution, Nafisi’s overarching claim is that the Islamic Republic has been oppressive towards women and has “confiscated” (6) their personal freedoms and private lives. Paramount in Nafisi’s portrayal of Iranian women is her fixation with the veil. Even though Nafisi’s accounts of the “oppression” of women is far too exaggerated, it is an incontrovertible fact that women’s dress code, especially with the enforcement of veiling, and opposite-sex relationships were more restricted for some women in the aftermath of the Revolution. However, the issue is not as much

whether women's freedoms were restricted in the aftermath of the Revolution or not; rather, as critics have argued, it is the manner in which she represents the status of Iranian woman and how this representation can become complicit in the imperial and hegemonic agenda of the U.S. towards Muslim countries. Critics have also faulted the absence of even a single reference to the dramatic improvements in the lives of Iranian women after the Revolution and the portrayal of their situation as static and passive in a manner that ignores their socio-political agency, ambitions, and achievements. This (under)representation paves the way for the exploitation of the cause of women's rights to imply the need for Iranian women's "liberation" and military intervention by the United States (DePaul "Re-Reading" 82).

As a point of departure, it is crucial to demonstrate how Nafisi's discussion of the Iranian "Woman Question" and particularly the veil in Iran is framed by a convergence of "feminist Orientalism" and "Orientalist feminism". Narrating her experience of teaching Middle Eastern memoirs to her students in the U.S., Lisa Eck concludes that the predominant ideological barrier that students face in the current academic milieu in the U.S. is feminist Orientalism, which she defines as "the urge to read sexist traditions as an inevitable part of the Other's otherness, and liberated femininity as a cultural and political *fait accompli* in the West" (13). Orientalist feminism, according to Roxana Bahramitash,<sup>22</sup> is a "modern project and a type of feminism that advocates and supports particular foreign policies toward the Middle East" ("The War on Terror" 221). Even though the recent genre of neo-Orientalist narratives, epitomized by *RLT*, purport to defend women's rights and causes, they are heavily infused with traditional Orientalist stereotypes.

Building on Edward Said's theorization of Orientalism, Parvin Paidar's seminal study, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran* (1995), dissects the triple interconnected lineaments of Orientalist feminism. Firstly, according to Paidar, Orientalist feminism assumes an "oppositional dichotomy" of the West as a progressive and dynamic locus for women versus the East as a site where women are dominated by "traditionalism", defined

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<sup>22</sup> Roxana Bahramitash is a Professor of Women's Studies and Director of Research for the Canada Research Chair in Islam, Pluralism and Globalization at the University of Montreal.

as “a static and indigenous condition” (7). This dichotomy insinuates that Muslim women are “doomed to an unchanging condition in the absence of a Western challenge to Islam” (7). Therefore, the “essential difference” between the Oriental/Muslim woman and her Western counterpart constitutes a site of “political and cultural contestations” and serves as the central “metaphor for demarcating the self and the other” (Tavakoli-Targhi 74). Challenging the “simplistic” notions of “progress” and “development” in this reductionist dichotomy, Laura Nader has also referred to the “widespread belief” that Western women are “better off vis-à-vis their menfolk than their sisters in societies that are not ‘developed’” (323). She further argues that such “misleading cultural comparisons” promote simplistic contentions of “positional superiority which divert attention from the processes which are controlling women in both worlds” (323).

Secondly, Orientalist feminism is characterized by a denial of any agency and subjectivity to Oriental women and views them merely as “victims and not as agents of social transformation” (Bahramitash “The War on Terror” 222). Hence, Oriental/Muslim women’s resistance against domineering social structures and their attempts at self-empowerment and self-determination are totally absent in this discourse. Bereft of any agential potentiality, Muslim women need “saviors” who are none other than their “Western sisters” (Bahramitash “The War on Terror” 222).<sup>23</sup> This particular feature of Orientalist feminism derives from one of the principal assumptions of Orientalism that deems Orientals as unsuited for self-governance (Said *Orientalism* 109, 230), and, hence, in need of being “redeemed” and “civilized”. The idea is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the epigraph that Edward Said has borrowed from Karl Marx’s essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (*Orientalism* xiii). Crucial in this “civilizing” scheme was the condition of Oriental women, which continues to be invoked as an indicator of the Muslim world’s “primitivism”.<sup>24</sup> This, therefore, made the “civilizing mission” even more of a *sine qua*

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<sup>23</sup> To provide a contemporary case, Bahramitash cites the example of George W. Bush’s speech on the need to save Afghan women (“The War on Terror” 222).

<sup>24</sup> Bahramitash argues that while Muslim women were being constructed as backward and repressed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women in Western countries had few legal rights and were not allowed

*non* and consequently led to the colonization of what is now called the Middle East as well as North Africa (Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 222).

The third characteristic of Orientalist feminism is what Paidar has termed the "essentialisation and reification of women's history" (7). This final characteristic ascribes a unified singularity, homogeneity, and monolithicity to all Oriental, and in particular Muslim, women and therefore robs them of their diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, purporting that all Oriental societies are essentially alike and all their Muslim female inhabitants live under the same conditions. The following passage summarizes the three defining aspects, that is, the dichotomous, agency-denying, and homogenizing nature of Orientalist feminism:

While the history of women in the West was regarded as the product of complex economic and social development, Middle Eastern women's history was considered to be the product of the 'traditional Muslim view' seen 'as an inherited given' (Tucker, 1983). As a result, the process of historical change was often bypassed by Orientalist observers and countless essays on 'women in Islam' did little to explain the development of women's positions in various Middle Eastern societies and the differences which existed in Muslim women's histories within the region. (Paidar 7)

Put concisely, as Paidar has contended, "the Orientalist approach to the question of women and political change suffered from endemic essentialisation, ethnocentrism and stereotyping" (8).

Formulating a Gramscian-Foucauldian framework, Bahramitash has argued that the "hegemonic knowledge" produced about Oriental and Muslim women constructs a frame of reference that not only represents "the interests of the dominant class that manages to universalize its own beliefs and value systems to subordinate classes", but is also "restrictive and exclusive of alternative conceptions of reality" ("The War on Terror" 223). The dominant (neo-)Orientalist discourse on Oriental/Muslim women, then, is not only formed over time

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to vote ("The War on Terror" 222). This is a further example of what Nader has dubbed "misleading cultural comparisons" between Western and Eastern women (323).

through its proliferation in such institutions as the Western mainstream media, it is also exclusive of concepts that can offer a different understanding of how various modes of power can function. Hence, negative clichés about Muslim women have become such an integral part of the dominant discourse that it is almost impossible to disregard them.

More subtle in, but vital to, the construction of a hegemonic discourse is the successful engagement of “the opposition” towards serving the hegemonic power and discursive structure. As far as Orientalist feminism is concerned, the selfsame feminism that is allegedly opposed to indigenous tyranny turns into a tool, a plaything, at the disposal of the globalized hegemonic machine (Bahramitash “The War on Terror” 223). In the post-9/11 landscape Orientalist feminists have contributed to the interventionist agenda in U.S. foreign policies by propagating stereotypes of oppressed, victimized Muslim womanhood and advocating for the need to “liberate” them. On the other hand, as Bahramitash contends, (works of) Orientalist feminists, here epitomized by Nafisi, make the task of defending both their citizen and gender rights for Muslim women much more difficult (“The War on Terror” 222). The connection between Orientalist feminism and imperial hegemony will be further elaborated in the discussion of Nafisi’s connection with U.S. neo-conservatism in the following sections.

### **Behind the Veil: The *Topos Obligé* of Feminist Orientalism**

Throughout the narration of her memoir, Nafisi thoroughly exploits the gamut of Orientalist stereotypes associated with Oriental women which are most familiar to Western readers: obsession with virginity (19, 30, 73, 212, 57, 60), sexual abuse (273), underage marriage (27, 43, 257, 60, 61), polygamy (335), and, most recurrently, the veil.<sup>25</sup> Nafisi constructs many of these tropes around the character of Humbert whom she constantly likens to Iranian men. Analyzing Nabokov’s *Lolita*, for instance, Nafisi, addressing her readers, declares: “please remember ladies and gentlemen of the jury, [...] had she lived in the Islamic Republic, [this child] would

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<sup>25</sup> (5, 12, 15, 26, 27, 28, 32, 46, 51, 53, 95, 97, 103, 105, 111, 112, 116, 134, 146, 151, 152, 153, 160, 163, 165, 167, 174, 176, 179, 181, 183, 184, 191, 192, 200, 203, 207, 217, 218, 222, 244, 253, 280, 296, 300, 327, 328, 331, 343, 351, 352)

have been long ripe for marriage to men older than Humbert” (43). In a similar vein, the chapter on Austen opens with a parody of one of her most famous quotes: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife” (257). Not only are such ‘facts’ not treated as aberrations or vices applicable to any given society, they are presented as intrinsic components of Iranian/ Muslim culture that apparently make Iran “a man’s paradise” (335).

More than any other Orientalist topos, however, Nafisi draws on the most familiar of established (neo)Orientalist topoi the veil, which as many scholars have argued, has turned into the most persistent Orientalist preoccupation (Asha 48), or what Behdad and Williams have dubbed the *topos obligé* of neo-Orientalist discourses (293). As far as Oriental/Muslim female identity is concerned, no parameter has generated as much obsessive fixation as the veil. So evident is this fixation that the veil appears in titles, subtitles, and cover photos of almost all neo-Orientalist memoirs, Iranian-American or otherwise, that display images of submissive Muslim women clad, typically, in black veils, as if desperately awaiting liberation. The veil, therefore, becomes an all-embracing signifier of the backwardness, oppression, docility, and submissiveness of the Muslim woman (Asha 49). Characteristically for Orientalist and colonialist discursive practices, these narratives treat the veil question as a singular, homogeneous, and monolithic entity and, therefore, efface the diversity and multiplicity of its practices – both across Muslim countries and within particular cultures – and its social, cultural, and religious contexts and significations. As Chandra Mohanty has remarked, “colonization almost invariably implies ... a discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (49).

This is particularly significant since various veiling practices, which are rooted much more in cultural praxis than merely in religious ones, lead to different levels of what in Orientalist discourses is portrayed as Muslim women’s invisibility and immobility. On a much broader plane, yet, the veil has come to represent not only the disadvantaged social status of Muslim women, but is constantly utilized as “one of the most popular Western ways of representing the ‘problems of Islam’” (Watson 153) or as Douglas J. Loveless has pointed out,

“all that is perceived to be wrong with a Muslim world linked to suppression, abuse, and terror” (1). Against this backdrop, as the iconic post-9/11 neo-Orientalist female life narrative, *RLT* shows an obsessive preoccupation with the veil throughout the entire text.<sup>26</sup> Being one of the most recurrent themes in Nafisi’s narrative, the politics of the veil, therefore, deserves special attention and a thorough understanding, not only as a running leitmotif but also because, like much else in the text, it is perpetually dehistoricized, decontextualized, and oversimplified.

In presenting the image of the veil and Muslim women, Nafisi’s account carries the impress of (neo-)Orientalist discourses representing the veil as backward, restrictive, and an “unnatural encumbrance” (Asha 49). In a significant passage, Nafisi recounts her self-professed fixation with the veil, which leads her to literally act out the Orientalist assumption of the veil contributing to the invisibility of Muslim women:

My constant obsession with the veil had made me buy a very wide black robe that covered me down to my ankles, with kimonolike sleeves, wide and long. I had gotten into the habit of withdrawing my hands into the sleeves and pretending that I had no hands. Gradually, I pretended that when I wore the robe, my whole body disappeared: my arms, breasts, stomach and legs melted and disappeared and what was left was a piece of cloth the shape of my body that moved here and there, guided by some invisible force. (167)

What is striking in the above passage is not only that Nafisi’s description lends credence to the Orientalist assumption of the veil as a signifier of Muslim women’s invisibility, but she also acts the idea out in a manner that reifies the concept and brings it from the theoretical realm of Orientalist and white feminist thinking down to the level of performance and pragmatic actuality. Similarly, the “pretense” of having “no hands” is an equally important signification, as it emphasizes the “immobility” the veil supposedly causes, while also evoking the notion of Muslim women’s powerlessness and lack of agency by having no “hand” in their own destiny.

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<sup>26</sup> The word veil and its synonymous derivatives appear more than 160 times in the book and the narrative is packed with numerous descriptions of characters’ veiling and unveiling routines.



This, consequently, indicates their need to be “saved” and “liberated” from their own religion and traditions as well as the patriarchal political culture that has “veiled” and “subjugated” them.

Nafisi does not dissimulate her revulsion of the practice that for her goes far beyond covering the body; for her, it masks the identity and the subjectivity of those who observe it as well. In her account, the veil is represented as dehumanizing and her “girls” are, as if miraculously, revealed as human only when they have shed their veils. Nafisi’s desire to see the “girls” unveiled is highly reminiscent of the colonial desire “to catch a glimpse of Eastern women unveiled” (Hoglund 2). However, the colonial fantasy of unveiling the Muslim woman transcends the boundaries of obsessive voyeurism and sexual exoticism. It is, instead, part of the larger project of “liberating” and “civilizing” the Orient as a whole. As Meyda Yeğenoğlu has argued, there is a “metonymic association” between the Orient and its women that renders Oriental women as “the essence of the Orient”, which, *ipso facto*, lends an urgency to lifting the veil, for “unveiling and thereby modernizing the woman of the Orient signified the transformation of the Orient itself” (84). The first step, as the massive repository of colonial and Orientalist literature suggests, on the path to the liberation of the “suppressed” Muslim woman is to strip her of her veil. Along the same line, in his seminal *Black Skin, White Masks* (1991), Franz Fanon demonstrates how unveiling was used as a civilizing *modus operandi* by the French colonizers of Algeria: “Here and there it thus happened that a woman was ‘saved’ and symbolically ‘unveiled’” (42). The idea is perhaps most pithily articulated in Gayatri Spivak’s *locus classicus* “white men saving brown women from brown men” which she wrote in her analysis of the British campaign against the sati in her influential *Can the Subaltern Speak?* to illustrate the colonial “civilizing mission” (48).

In her *Liberation Under Siege: U.S. Military Occupation and Japanese Women's Enfranchisement*, Lisa Yoneyama discusses the long history of U.S. wars against and military intervention in sovereign countries under the pretext of “feminist emancipation”, as was the case with the U.S. occupation of Japan (1945–1952) (889). In a similar vein, in his classic study *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (1985), Robert

Walter Johannsen dissects the nexus between cultural work and U.S. foreign policy during the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), and interprets “the visions of romance and chivalry in which U.S. forces ‘saved’ Mexican women from barbarous Mexican men” (Rowe 260).

With this in perspective, it is no surprise, then, that a crucial part of Reza Shah’s “modernizing” venture was the extremely controversial forced unveiling of Iranian women in 1936, the justification of which was predicated on the colonialist assumptions of the veil being a hindrance to Muslim women’s contribution to and participation in society (Paidar 104). As Bahramitash has argued, Reza Shah’s “liberation” project was completely in keeping with the project of enforcing a Western lifestyle “that replicated the economic and political interests of the West” (“The War on Terror” 225).

In a significant passage in *RLT*, Nafisi describes her reaction to her “girls” removing their veils, thus asserting that her student’s unveiling is taking off “more than their scarves and robes”, insinuating that their true subjectivities and identities were fully revealed only when their veils were shed:

When my students came into that room [Nafisi’s living room], they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self. Our world in that living room with its window framing my beloved Elburz Mountains became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of blackscarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below. (6)

The excerpt above is misleading in a Western context, as it suggests that the veil could not be shed in other contexts and Nafisi’s living room provides a unique “sanctuary” in which the girls had the liberty of not wearing it. The reality, however, is that the living room is just one of many private, homosocial – and often heterosocial – spaces where the veil need not be observed. Since the Western reader is not conversant with this context, Nafisi takes liberties with her descriptions of the veiling practice and the contexts of its observance. More significantly, the excerpt suggests that the students’ realization of their “inimitable self” seems to be contingent solely upon the removal of their veils, that is to say their womanhood and their perceptions of

themselves, or to borrow from Jungian terminology, their individuation, is reduced to a simplistic form of body politics in which they are judged by the measure to which they observe the veil. This becomes more evident in the author's homogenizing representation of veil-observing Muslim girls and women as ugly, fanatical, backward, and brainwashed, vis-à-vis the beautiful, enlightened, intellectual, and autonomous non-observants. Furthermore, Nafisi's provision of a "liberating" space for her girls both to "unveil" and study "forbidden" Western literature tallies well with what Minoo Moallem has dubbed "feminist imperialism" in Western women's desire "to enlighten third world women to the civilizing project of the West, wherein first world women become the norm and third world women get constructed as a singular, non-Western other" (Elkholy).

In a similar vein, many Western reviewers have echoed Nafisi's description of "the mundane activity of women's taking off their outerwear, something women in Iran do regularly" as a "process of individualization" (Rastegar 113). In these reviews, as in *RLT*, the veil is portrayed as an impediment to women's sense of individuality and agency and symbolizes drab uniformity and intellectual retardation. Mitra Rastegar has pointed out the discursive alignment regarding veiling between *RLT* and these reviews in which unveiling is presented as a process "whereby the women 'emerge as individuals' ("Azar Nafisi," 2004), revealing 'vivid personalities' (Hook 2003) and shedding 'their inhibitions, speaking openly' (Sismondo 2003)" (113).

The unveiling scene mentioned above is also significant from another perspective. One of the defining characteristics of the Orientalist discourse has to do with its intended audience, that is how it "Orientalizes the Orient for the purpose of Occidental consumption" (Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 226). Hence, in describing the unveiling of her "girls" in the alleged enclosed privacy of her living room, Nafisi is striking a familiar chord with her Western audience. By divulging to her readers the physical and personal characteristics of her students, Nafisi assumes the position of "the agent who 'reveals', offering Westerners a view into Iranian women's lives and, more significantly, humanizing the previously 'anonymous veiled figures'" (Rastegar 113).

Nafisi's role, however, is far from unprecedented. Her intermediary situatedness, or her comprador positionality, in fact, is reminiscent of white Western women who had the "privilege" of frequenting Oriental harems and whose accounts of the harem could gratify the Orientalist/masculine desire to have access to this 'hidden space'.<sup>27</sup> In her *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (1998), Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues that the Western subject, "frustrated by the closure of the space of the Oriental woman" and determined to have access to the "hidden" interiority of the harem, can only resort to the Western women's accounts of the harem life:

It is thus only through the assistance of the Western woman (for she is the only "foreigner" allowed to enter into the "forbidden zone") that the mysteries of this inaccessible "inner space" and the "essence" of the Orient secluded in it could be unconcealed; it is she who can remedy the longlasting lack of the Western subject. The inability to see and have access to the interiority of the other and to the space of woman reminds men of their limit, their lack. (75)

Nafisi's living room, therefore, takes on the properties of colonial harems into which she offers her Western readers a glimpse to see "behind the veil". Like the Western women who could access the interior space of the harem, Nafisi's simultaneously insider-outsider position enables her to offer descriptions of unveiled girls and the details of their everyday life without implicating herself as exotic, mysterious, victimized and submissive.<sup>28</sup> In other words, one could argue that she appears as someone willing to subordinate her girls in the name of displaying her own subjectivity which can, in turn, raise ethical questions around such issues as exploitation.

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<sup>27</sup> One example is Mary Wortley-Montagu's account, the *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), (possibly the most famous and inaugural of these sorts of accounts), which goes beyond simply reporting what she sees. Her comparison is quite pragmatic, particular, and sensitive, and she is not simply "viewing"; she participates as much as she can (though ironically, her tightly-laced corset does not allow her to shed her own "veil").

<sup>28</sup> A contemporary precedent is Geraldine Brooks, a white Australian middle class woman, and the author of *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1994), who used her position as a journalist in the Middle East and North Africa to enter the "private" world of Muslim women.

Besides the manner in which Nafisi's depictions of the veil resound with Orientalist clichés and cater to the Western fantasy of unveiling the Oriental woman, it is also characterized by an informed elimination of many significant historico-political contexts that have to be allowed for when discussing the situation of Iranian women. This informed elimination and selective historicity will be further elaborated in details in the following sections. Nevertheless, as far as the concept of veiling is concerned, the passage below, which exemplifies Nafisi's description of the veil in the context of post-Revolution Iran, provides a fitting example:

From the beginning of the revolution there had been many aborted attempts to impose the veil on women; these attempts failed because of persistent and militant resistance put up mainly by Iranian women. In many important ways the veil had gained a symbolic significance for the regime. Its reimposition would signify the complete victory of the Islamic aspect of the revolution, which in those first years was not a foregone conclusion. The unveiling of women mandated by Reza Shah in 1936 had been a controversial symbol of modernization, a powerful sign of the reduction of the clergy's power. It was important for the ruling clerics to reassert that power. (*Reading Lolita* 112)

Even though the passage above appropriates the veil trope as the most powerful and recurrent symbol of (mis)representing Muslim women, the pseudo-intellectual space within which it is discussed in the memoir is almost completely devoid of any meaningful religious, historical, or sociopolitical context. Even the author's presentation of the mandatory unveiling of Reza Shah is, at best, misinformed, reducing the forced unveiling project and the brutal force employed in implementing it to merely a "symbol of modernization, a sign of the reduction of the clergy's power".

DePaul has pointed to Nafisi's failure in conceding that "assaults on women's freedom of dress in Iran began long before 1979 [when] in 1936 Reza Shah Pahlavi made Iran the first Muslim nation to forbid women the veil, unveiling by force women who defied his edict" ("Re-

Reading" 85). However, not a single passing reference is made to the atrocities perpetrated against Iranian women in the forced execution of the project. The mandatory unveiling of Iranian women, instigated by Reza Shah's visit to Turkey, where Kemal Atatürk's secular agenda forbade Islamic veiling, had many unfortunate ramifications for the greater majority of Iranian women who were practicing Muslims. Quite ironically, the decree, which was meant to enhance female visibility and social mobility banned them from the heterosocial public sphere and confined the larger portion of the Iranian female population to the interior of the domestic space, as they found appearing unveiled in public averse to their traditional and religious beliefs and practices. Also, the ban caused greater dependency for Iranian women by making them more reliant on male members of their households to run the errands that required being exposed to the public eye, *ipso facto* reinforcing the patriarchalism of a highly traditional and conservative society.

Women's refusal to enter the public arena unveiled – predicated both upon religious doctrines and the traditional association of the veil with feminine virtue and modesty – was met with severe repression where the police aggressively unveiled women and searched private houses for veils (Paidar 107). The imposed unveiling, therefore, made educational access for the religious and traditional families that formed the vast majority of the population virtually impossible and contributed significantly to the perpetuation of illiteracy among them, as the "imposed absence" of the veil led to their state-sanctioned social immobility and their outright elimination from the public landscape (Balasescu 744). Behdad and Williams have argued that Reza Shah's forceful unveiling project not only met with strong resistance from Iranian women "whose access to education and socialization was ironically curtailed ... but it also maligned independent socialists, liberal nationalists, and feminists who were fighting for women's rights at the time as puppets of the tyrannical regime" (290).

As far as the imposition of the veil is concerned, scholars have observed that the social impacts of the imposed unveiling and veiling projects are by no means comparable. While the forced unveiling of women made a large part of the female population invisible and literally eliminated them from the heterosocial public arena, the postrevolutionary mandatory veiling –

while admittedly encroaching upon some women's freedom of choice – did not preclude them from the public space. In contrast, the Revolution provided the traditional female population with unprecedented social, educational, and professional opportunities that were once privileges for the upper echelons of the society (Ramazani "Persepolis" 280). As Mitra Shavarini has remarked, "It is under the Islamic Republic that Iranian women have been most successful in entering institutions of higher education" (1979). In other words, while the boundaries of individual body politics were redefined after the Islamic Revolution, which was seen as restrictive of personal freedoms by a small minority of women, yet at a much larger scale "mobility increased for women who had previously been deprived of the opportunity to be present in socially meaningful spaces" (Balasescu 764).

Behdad and Williams have similarly argued that Nafisi's discussion of the imposition of the veil makes it seem like the veil was imposed "from above", disavowing the fact that the law was eventually abrogated by Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza, when "he had to lift the compulsory unveiling soon after his inauguration as king in 1941 due to strong public opposition" (290). It bears noting that during the reign of the last shah, with the exception of a small minority of women in the capital, Tehran, and a few other major cities, Iranian women wore the chador, "a garment whose origin dates back to the pre-Islamic Achaemenid rulers who imposed it to protect their wives and concubines from the public gaze" (Behdad and Williams 290). Furthermore, the excerpt above also overlooks the fact that what made the veiling mandate possible after the Iranian Revolution were "profound cultural and religious notions of modesty and piety among Iranian women, without whose consensus mandatory veiling would have been difficult, if not impossible" (Behdad and Williams 290). Amy DePaul has also pointed that even though some Iranian women felt uncomfortable with the new dress code, most women "welcomed it and, inadvertently, were liberated by it" ("Re-Reading" 83).

Nafisi's account also suffers from numerous lacunae, which account for both the misplaced exaggeration and studied underrepresentation of the question of Iranian women, both pre- and post-Revolution. According to Nafisi, Iranian women prior to the Revolution could "walk the streets freely, enjoy the company of the opposite sex, join the police force, become

pilots, live under laws that were among the most progressive in the world regarding women” (27). Nevertheless, Nafisi’s account of Iranian women suffers from a simultaneous romanticization of women’s status in the pre-Revolution era and an oversimplification of their condition after the Revolution. NESTA Ramazani, another Iranian-American memoirist, for instance, maintains that in placing the blame squarely on the Islamic Republic for whatever Nafisi disapproves of, she betrays her ignorance of the fact that many of the difficulties she and her students encountered “were products of a deeply traditional, patriarchal society coming abruptly face-to-face with modernity and all that it implies” (“Persepolis” 280). She has further challenged Nafisi’s idealization of the pre-Revolutionary status of Iranian women, arguing that

Family law under the rule of the Shah remained governed by Shari'a (Islamic law), with only slight modifications brought about by the Family Protection Act. Laws governing divorce, alimony, child custody, payment of “blood money,” testimony in a court of law, and other issues were all governed by Shari'a then as they are now. (280)

Ramazani further elaborates how Nafisi’s discussion of the Iranian woman question either disregards or is ignorant of many social and historical facts:

Nafisi similarly overlooks the fact that in pre-revolutionary days the women who enjoyed the benefits of pursuing educations and professions were a relatively small number of women, mostly from the elite, upper and middle-classes. One would never guess from reading this book that Iranian women's educational opportunities have expanded, that they today enjoy an exceptionally high rate of literacy, are the beneficiaries of one of the most successful family planning programs in the world, and constitute sixty-three per cent of university entrants and roughly fifteen per cent of university faculty members. Nor would one guess that Iran has a female vice-president, a female advisor to the president and thirteen female members of parliament, and that women are at the forefront of a nascent, widespread democratic movement in Iran. So little is known in the West about these advances of Iranian women that it is small



wonder that Shirin Ebadi's winning of the Nobel Peace Prize was met by a worldwide "Shirin who?" ("Persepolis" 280).<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, other critics, notable among them Ansia Khaz Ali, the vice-chancellor of one of Iran's leading universities, have pointed out that the overall condition of Iranian women has improved tremendously after the Iranian Revolution, citing such factors as the literacy rate, higher education, social, political, and economic participation, lower infant mortality rate, and higher life expectancy, as indices of that improvement (Khaz Ali 6-20; Koegeler 34; Bahramitash "The War on Terror").

Some critics have drawn attention to the fact that, to Nafisi's credit, she has openly expressed her stance on the veil by stressing that the issue was not "as much the veil itself as the freedom of choice" (152) (Asha 49). Nonetheless, similar to Nafisi's misleading reference to Reza Shah's unveiling project, her assertion is hardly convincing. Even though the author attempts on occasions to frame her revulsion against the practice as a feminist and intellectual opposition to mandatory veiling (rather than against the veil *per se*), her black-and-white characterization and caricaturing of Muslim women who observe the practice proves the contrary. There are many occasions in the book where Iranian women, and especially students, who have chosen to observe the veil, are denigrated and depicted as merely acting out of revolutionary zeal, religious fanaticism, or submission to a patriarchal tradition, rather than out of choice and conviction.

Nassrin, for instance, is the only chador-wearing student who is ever allowed a voice. However, both her brief life story and her participation in Nafisi's classes reveal that apparently the only reason she is given a voice is that through her – significantly, an apparently devout Muslim – the reader is invited to witness both the "brutality" of the Islamic government as well as the sanctimonious and sexually perverse religious patriarchy that is presented throughout the narrative as integral to Muslim beliefs. Nafisi's description of her first encounter with

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<sup>29</sup> Some of the figures in Ramazani's comment might have changed since the publication of her review. However, the crust of her argument rings even more true today, with the ever-increasing participation of Iranian women in social, political, and academic spheres.

Nassrin after seven years in which, to her utter surprise, she is wearing the chador is quite telling:

The last time I had seen her she was wearing a navy scarf and a flowing robe, but now she was dressed in a thick black chador from head to foot. She looked even smaller in the chador, her whole body hidden behind the bulk of the dark, shapeless cloth. Another transformation was her posture: she used to sit bolt upright on the edge of the chair, as if prepared to run at a moment's notice; now she slumped almost lethargically, looking dreamy and absentminded, writing in slow motion. (191)

Not only does the chador seem to have shrunk Nassrin's physical body, it has also "transformed" her posture, transmogrifying her from a confident and vivacious young girl to a "lethargic", "dreamy", and "absent-minded" one. In other words, the chador seems to be the chief culprit behind Nassrin's physical and temperamental metamorphosis. Nafisi adds, however, that "some of her old familiar gestures were still with her, like the restless movement of her hands and her constant shifting from one foot to the other" (191). In other words, the chador has bereft her of her buoyancy and ambitiousness and has left her only her less flattering attributes of disconcertion and restlessness.

To the right of Nassrin in the class sit "the two members of the Muslim Students' Association" whose names Nafisi has, unsurprisingly, forgotten,<sup>30</sup> so she names them Miss Hatef and Miss Ruhi and then characterizes them as such: "They are all negative attention. Every once in a while, from beneath their black chadors, which reveal no more than a sharp nose on one and a small, upturned one on the other, they whisper; sometimes they even smile" (192). As the quote reveals, the two "Muslim" students are represented as nameless, shapeless, faceless beings in such a dehumanizing manner that Nafisi has to add the word "even" to stress that smiling was not something they were normally capable of. She then goes on to share her

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<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding the identities of "Muslim" and politically active students, the names of "non-Muslim" students and the ones with whom Nafisi sympathizes are never forgotten. Moreover, the names she gives to these "nameless" character have often negative connotations in Persian.

impression of their veil – that is, the chador – that the two Muslim students are wearing commenting regretfully on the transformation of its meaning:

There is something peculiar about the way they wear their chadors. I have noticed it in many other women, especially the younger ones. For there is in them, in their gestures and movements, none of the shy withdrawal of my grandmother, whose every gesture begged and commanded the beholder to ignore her, to bypass her and leave her alone. All through my childhood and early youth, my grandmother's chador had a special meaning to me. It was a shelter, a world apart from the rest of the world. I remember the way she wrapped her chador around her body and the way she walked around her yard when the pomegranates were in bloom. Now the chador was forever marred by the political significance it had gained. It had become cold and menacing, worn by women like Miss Hatef and Miss Ruhi with defiance. (192)

The above passage not only demonstrates Nafisi's total lack of sympathy for, and appreciation of, the complexities of the veiling practice, but it is quite ironic in the way it romanticizes her grandmother's practice and denigrates those of the others. The irony of Nafisi's comment on the chador lies in the fact that earlier in the memoir, she refers to her grandmother who "had refused to leave the house for three months when she was forced to unveil" (152). As discussed above, the refusal to appear unveiled in public and to rather stay within the interiority of the domestic space was an overtly political gesture in defiance of the government-mandated prohibition of veiling in public. Thus, one could argue that Nafisi's reductionist treatment of the veil as romanticized nostalgia bereft of its sociopolitical significations reveals a blind spot in her thinking about and reading of the veil, which ignores its significance in the majority of Iranian and Muslim women's lives.

Characters like Miss Ruhi, who are also prevalent among Nafisi's male students, are not only disparaged for their observance of their religious beliefs, but are without exception portrayed as philistine and literarily insensitive. Discussing Henry James' *Daisy Miller* in her university class, Nafisi informs her students that "Winterbourne was not the only one to feel

relief on discovering the answer to Daisy's riddle" and his view was shared by students like Miss Ruhi:

Miss Ruhi asked why the novel did not end with Daisy's death. Did that not seem the best place to stop? Daisy's death seemed like a nice ending for all parties concerned. Mr. Ghomi could gloat over the fact that she had paid for her sins with her life, and most others in the class could now sympathize with her without any feeling of guilt. (197)

While Nafisi gives Miss Ruhi credit for "describing the plot" of the assigned works, "which at least demonstrated that she had read the books" and that "she even, in some cases, had ... read about them" (199), she adds that "she seldom expressed her own opinions", thus reinforcing the alleged submissiveness and lack of agency of Muslim women. When she does voice her views, Miss Ruhi only evinces her literary philistinism. She objects to "Wuthering Heights's immorality", writes that "Daisy was not merely immoral, she was 'unreasonable'", "lament[s] the fact that the right-thinking Mrs. Costello or Mrs. Walker was cast in such a negative light", and contends that "A writer like James ... was like Satan: he had infinite powers, but he used them to do evil, to create sympathy for a sinner like Daisy and distaste for more virtuous people like Mrs. Walker" (197). Nafisi's accounts of her literary discussions in her university classes are interspersed with such oversimplistic and reductivist commentaries by her "Muslim" and "fundamentalist" students, which reinforces the implication that those who disagree with Nafisi suffer from lesser intelligence. She thus closes the paragraph describing Miss Ruhi, concluding that "Miss Ruhi had imbibed the same dregs as Mr. Nyazi<sup>31</sup> [another "fundamentalist" student] and so many others" (197).

To complement the black-and-white characterization of "Muslim" vs. "non-Muslim" girls in her university class, immediately after descriptions of dour chador-wearing Muslim students, Nafisi turns to a non-chador wearing student who is both attractive and intelligent: "The beautiful girl with the too-sweet face in the fourth row", Nafisi describes, is Mitra "who always gets the highest grades" (192). The immediate effect is a classic neo-Orientalist binary: the

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<sup>31</sup> The surname chosen for him by Nafisi means "in need".

philistine, aesthetically unflattering, fundamentalist “Muslim” girls versus their attractive, intellectual, secular counterparts.<sup>32</sup>

It should, however, be added that taking issue with Nafisi’s representation of Iranian women and the veil should by no means be mistaken for a repudiation of the existence of patriarchal social structures in Iranian society or an affirmation of the post-Revolution enactment of compulsory veiling. Rather, what renders Nafisi’s account problematic is her almost total elimination of an analytic socio-historical context in which the women in her book are situated. As well, there is not a single reference in the text to the strong and popular advocacy of Iranian Muslim women both inside and outside the country for women’s rights and their significant participation in the social and political hierarchy of their country.<sup>33</sup>

In criticizing Iranian Muslim women and advocating the image of the ‘free’ Western woman as the ideal to aspire to, Nafisi also evinces an ignorance characteristic of white Western Orientalist feminism. As scholars have argued, dominant Western feminist discourses are often blind to the unfortunate situation of minority women. This ignorance, in turn, contributes to the preservation of the binarism into which dominant discourses on the Orient divide the world, by avoiding any criticism of the treatment of women of color, immigrants, and the underprivileged. Bahtamitash has discussed the popularization of Orientalist feminism and the “boom industry” it has generated through literature and films especially in the post-9/11 milieu. She has also warned against the far-reaching, damaging impact it continues to create for Muslim women by inciting racist, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic sentiments across the Western world (“The War on Terror” 227). She further argues that writings of (neo-)Orientalist feminists like Nafisi, can be exploited as the most effective propaganda in the West’s “War on Terror”

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<sup>32</sup> Later in the memoir Nafisi describes her encounter with Miss Ruhi, this time without her chador, and finds out that she was not actually as “plain” as she had thought her to be: “She was dressed in black, but not in a chador, and had curled a long black scarf around her neck, fastened with a silvery pin that seemed to quiver like a spider’s web against the black cloth. Her makeup was pale, and a few strands of dark brown hair showed from under the scarf. I kept remembering her other face, the austere one, so withdrawn that her lips seemed constantly pursed. I noticed now that she was not plain, as I had believed her to be” (331).

<sup>33</sup> This alternative perspective is the subject of the next chapter, which deals with alternative discourses, especially as regards the question of Iranian women.

against Muslim countries, as the personal experiences of such “self-proclaimed feminists” with the status of women in Muslim countries “impart an aura of authenticity to their portrayals of the primitive and misogynist nature of the religion” (“The War on Terror” 227).

In her analysis of liberal feminist imperialism, Leela Gandhi argues that “feminist opportunists seem to speak to the third world through a shared vocabulary” (86). In the case of *RLT*, this communal jargon is evidenced in the endorsement of the book and its author by like-minded feminists. Geraldine Brooks, for instance, who has also written a highly problematic account of the lives of Muslim women, which shows extensive ignorance, misinformation, and selectivity (Bahramitash “The War on Terror” 229), has praised Nafisi in her endorsement of *RLT* as “one of the heroes of the Islamic Republic”; a heroism that, according to Bahramitash, consists of “her experience in teaching English literature in postrevolutionary Iran and then leaving university to teach eight women at home about the glories of English literature” (“The War on Terror” 230).

### **Bridging the “Oriental Harem” to the “Free World”**

I have previously demonstrated that one of the common denominators of both Orientalist feminism and feminist Orientalism is the belief in the need to “liberate” and “save” Muslim women. I have also illustrated that, historically, unveiling has perhaps been the most significant colonial/Orientalist ambition on the path to this “liberation”, the idea of which figures prominently in *RLT*. The “liberating mission”, however, materializes at a more profound level in Nafisi’s memoir. As will be later elaborated, Nafisi’s medium for liberating her “girls” and resisting what she sees as the tyranny of the postrevolutionary Iranian government is teaching Western literature, a practice which she disingenuously insists on portraying as a daunting and even hazardous task in postrevolutionary Iran. In the private weekly sessions she holds in her apartment in the affluent north Tehran, she employs Western literary classics to discuss contemporary issues surrounding the lives of Iranian women, who are (mis)represented by her and her select students. Whitlock has remarked that Nafisi creates in her private class “a cell of resistance for a small group of bright young women, who cast off the chador at her door and

enter a space of enchantment and empathy created by Austen, Fitzgerald, and Nabokov" ("From Tehran" 11). Even if we take Whitlock's remark – that there is "enchantment" in the works of the mentioned authors – at face value, the idea that this "enchantment and empathy" are really "liberating" remains questionable.

The appropriation of Western literary classics as a liberating medium in the postrevolutionary Iran of the 80s is, as critics have suggested, a very problematic concept from different aspects. Nevertheless, before discussing Nafisi's pedagogical literary politics, it is crucial to examine the space in which the classes are held. "The living room", as it is frequently referred to in the memoir, is the most significant *mise en scène* in the narrative and figures prominently in it. In *RLT*, the living room is presented as an alternative world, a "protective cocoon" (26), a "sanctuary" and a "self-contained universe" (6) formed to escape what is deemed the cruelty of the oppressive Muslim world outside. In a passage juxtaposing two photographs of her students, one inside a university class and the other in her living room, Nafisi remarks:

The second photograph belonged to the world inside the living room. But outside, underneath the window that deceptively showcased only the mountains and the tree outside our house, was the other world, where the bad witches and furies were waiting to transform us into the hooded creatures of the first. (24)

For the Western reader, Nafisi's private class is made to represent in microcosm the goings-on of Iranian society, running the whole gamut of Iranian culture, religion, politics, education, gender issues, and sex. Nafisi and her "girls", therefore, become the embodiments of resistance to 'tyranny' through whom the reader is invited to observe the tangled web of social, religious, and political 'ills' of the Iranian society. The living room becomes more meaningful when juxtaposed with the outside world. Comparing the worlds within and without the living room, Nafisi states that "We tried to live in the open spaces, in the chinks created between that room, which had become our protective cocoon, and the censor's world of witches and goblins outside" (26). The binary created between the two worlds could not be more Orientalist. The

living room is 'blessed' with Western novels, 'sophisticated' literary discussions, Western delicacies, and unveiled, colourful girls. The world outside, on the other hand, is dominated by "revolutionaries", masses, "the black-scarved, timid faces" (6), and the "witches".

The quotes above are also noteworthy for the infantilism embedded in language, which likens the world outside Nafisi's living room to a fairy tale world dominated by "bad witches" and "furies". This infantilism informs some of Nafisi's other descriptions, too. Describing the changes she observes on her arrival in the Tehran airport, Nafisi remarks that "It seemed as if a bad witch with her broomstick had flown over the building and in one sweep had taken away the restaurants, the children and the women in colorful clothes that I remembered" (82). Similarly, listening to the stories of her girls, Nafisi thus expresses her emotional response:

I had a feeling that we were living a series of fairy tales in which all the good fairies had gone on strike, leaving us stranded in the middle of a forest not far from the wicked witch's candy house. (241)

Besides the infantilism of the above quotes, that villains are not "warlocks" and "goblins" but "witches" and "furies", deliberately female characters, further highlights the characteristically "feminizing" tropes of Orientalist discourse discussed earlier.

The space provided by the living room is one characterized by an arguably paradoxical double-tier signification. On the one hand, it can be seen as a haremesque space in which Nafisi's young "girls" are shown unveiling and divulging their private lives, 'privileges' not normally accessible to the Western masculine gaze and thus material for speculation and wild imagination. In this space, Nafisi assumes the role of a Scheherazade whose Oriental tales provide her curious Western readers with a peephole through which to penetrate the interiority of this feminine space. On the other hand, however, Nafisi's subversive book club constitutes a simulacrum of the "Free World", a deliberately all-female space to which its denizens bring "their secrets, their pains and their gifts" (58), peruse and discuss "forbidden" Western literature, savoring their coffee and Western chocolate delicacies, engaging in enthusiastic discussions about (lack of) gender equality and women's rights, and broach such



'taboos' as sex. The space, then, turns into a familiar sight for Western readers, what DePaul has dubbed a "literary 'Sex and the City' (except the city is Tehran)" ("Re-Reading" 73). "In the magical space of my living room" (58), Nafisi assumes the role of the mentor, the illuminator, the savior, and even the mother (exemplified by her repeated, intentional references to her students as her "girls"), while her students come "in a disembodied state of suspension" (58). She presides over her class in her living room, introducing her students to the "enchantment" of the world of Western classics:

In a world unknown and presumably unknowable to Nabokov, in a forlorn living room with windows looking out towards distant white-capped mountains, time and again I would stand witness to the unlikeliest of readers as they lost themselves in a madness of hair-ruffling. (22)

Thus, having opened the door to, and therefore liberated, her students by teaching them Nabokov's *Lolita* and other classics, Nafisi posits herself in the superior position of the savior who "stands witness" to her "girls" who have apparently been charmed by their newly earned freedom. That the girls are described as "the unlikeliest of readers" of Nabokov's novels only serves to reinforce Nafisi's assertions regarding the purported philistinism of Iranian culture (which will be discussed later in the chapter). It is in the same space that Nafisi's students "rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became ... like *Lolita* we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom" (26). In keeping with the view of the living room as a microcosmic replica of "the free West", Melamed has argued that the living room "is an unspoken and unspeakably bourgeois space, where western cultural and political supremacy are taken for granted, and home is part of a moral and affective code that legitimates a politics of privatization" ("Reading Tehran in *Lolita*: Making Racialized" 82).

## From Neo-Orientalism to Neo-Conservatism

It was mentioned earlier that Orientalist feminism is readily appropriated by supremacist and conservative ideologies to serve the interests of hegemonic power structures. As far as *RLT* is concerned, serving Western hegemonic and imperialistic political ideologies, crystallized both in Nafisi's affiliation with the neo-conservative coterie in the U.S. and her propagation, wittingly or unwittingly, of their agenda through her memoir is one of the main reasons for which her work has come under criticism (DePaul "Re-Reading" 77). This can be read within the framework of Genette's *paratextuality* as part of the elements intertwined with the politics of the book, both in form of peritexts (as shown in the case of *RLT*'s front cover) and epitexts (that is, beyond the print copy). Rowe has argued that neoconservatives have varied the pattern for the promotion of "Anglo-Saxonism" or "Western supremacy" – formerly conducted by white male politicians, intellectuals, and writers – by "supporting women and ethnic minorities who share their views and thus give legitimacy to the cultural diversity of their presumed meritocracy" (253). Against this backdrop, Melamed has observed that since her immigration to the U.S., Nafisi has been inducted "as a new immigrant intellectual into centrist and neoconservative policy and academic circles" ("Reading Tehran in Lolita: Making Racialized" 81). Similarly, critics have cited the many instances of circumstantial evidence corroborating Nafisi's indisputably neoconservative political affiliations. Nafisi herself has mentioned in *RLT* the fact that after leaving Iran in 1997, she found an "academic and intellectual home" at the Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University, where she was able to complete *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and "pursue [her] projects at SAIS" with a "generous grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation"<sup>34</sup> (346-47) and where she is director of the Dialogue Project, "a multi-year initiative designed to promote – in a primarily

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<sup>34</sup> The Foundation, Rowe has noted, "provides significant support to conservative think-tanks across the country" and its board "includes some of the most influential neoconservatives from government, the military, and higher education" (255).

cultural context – the development of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world” (Rowe 255).<sup>35</sup>

Even though a few critics have dismissed attention to Nafisi’s political affiliations as irrelevant, many others have argued that the connection is actually quite crucial in a better appreciation of the politics of the production and reception of *RLT* in the United States. In the aftermath of 9/11, when the U.S. was at the peak of its “War on Terror”, and Iran was branded by the then-U.S. president as a member of an “axis of evil” and an “outpost of tyranny”, such cultural productions serve to “reinforce what many North Americans want to believe about the ‘oppression’ of Iranian women” and are utilized to “raise support for the neo-conservative agenda to stir anti-Muslim sentiment in North America as well as to promote the war on terror” (Bahramitash “The War on Terror” 221). It is no surprise, then, that an article titled *To Bomb or Not to Bomb, That is the Iran Question* published in the neo-conservative *Weekly Standard* actually cites *RLT* to argue for a first-strike against Iran:

Although some Western female journalists have tried to depict Iranian women as liberated under their headscarves and veils, these sentiments have an uneasy time with other reporting that shows Iranian women, however strong-willed and independent, being severely abused by the regime's Islamic-law system. The phenomenal global success of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has also made it more difficult to view the Islamic Republic's internal ethics, particularly regarding women, benignly. (Gerecht)

Professor Hamid Dabashi has explained how the memoir has helped further the Bush administration’s foreign policy goals:

One can now clearly see and suggest that this book is partially responsible for cultivating the U.S. (and by extension the global) public opinion against Iran, having already done a great deal by being a key propaganda tool at the disposal of the Bush administration

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<sup>35</sup> The Project, according to its website, deals with issues “that have been the main targets of Islamists and, as a result, are the most significant impediments to the creation of open and pluralistic societies in the Muslim world, including culture and the myth of Western culture [sic] imperialism, women’s issues, and human rights, among others” (Rowe 255).

during its prolonged wars in such Muslim countries as Afghanistan (since 2001) and Iraq (since 2003). ("Native Informers")

Paramount in this critique of Nafisi is her affiliation firstly with the renowned veteran Orientalist Bernard Lewis, a relationship dubbed Nafisi's "most damning association" with U.S. neoconservatives (DePaul "Re-Reading" 78). Lewis is mostly known for his "clash of civilizations" theory proposed in his 1990 *Atlantic Monthly* essay titled *The Roots of Muslim Rage*, which postulates an ineluctable "clash" between the West and Islam, which has been adopted as a point of departure by the United States' top neo-conservative policymakers. The theory was widely criticized particularly by the late Edward Said who remarked that Lewis's "ideological colors are manifest in [the] title [of his article]" ("The Clash of Ignorance"). Nafisi's association with Bernard Lewis is of particular significance, given his controversial theorization of the civilizational degeneration in the Islamic world, while his own bestseller, *What Went Wrong?* (2002), still continues to serve as one of the crucial "ahistorical scaffolding[s] upon which the neo-conservative hard core ... hang their policy prescriptions" (Mottahedeh). In a similar vein, Lewis's stances on the Iraq War as well as the Iranian "nuclear issue" provide a significant context in the appreciation of Nafisi's memoir.<sup>36</sup> Along the same lines, Nafisi's association with Fouad Ajami, one of her major supporters, as well as her "neo-conservative mentor [and] her boss at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington", who was also another outspoken advocate of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (Ajami xii), has also been cited by critics (Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 230).

Quite similar to the shared language through which, according to Gandhi, Orientalist feminists speak of the Muslim world (86), is the reciprocal affirmation of neoconservative ideologues. Such affirmations figure in such peritexts of Nafisi's memoir as the blurbs and the acknowledgement. In the blurb Bernard Lewis has written for Nafisi's memoir, he has commended *RLT* as "a masterpiece" offering "profound and fascinating insights" into both Western literature and postrevolutionary Iran. Nafisi, in turn, has reciprocated by cryptically

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<sup>36</sup> Lewis has been designated by some as "the most significant intellectual influence behind the invasion of Iraq" (Weisberg; Michael).

thanking Bernard Lewis as the one “who opened the door” in her acknowledgment (346), a gesture of gratitude that has generated much criticism and raised questions about her consorting with political and intellectual neoconservative cliques in the United States. As several scholars have noted (Bahramitash “The War on Terror” 230; Dabashi “Native Informers”; Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 636; Mottahedeh), this connection is far from irrelevant to Nafisi’s memoir and helps elucidate her position with regards to matters both Iranian and American. The significance of this association in the publication and reception of *RLT* is better understood if one puts into perspective the fact that both prior to and after the publication of her memoir, Nafisi was promoted by Benador Associates, a public relations corporation that promotes neoconservative luminaries and public speakers advocating U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, which is also well-known for its hawkish, and in particular anti-Iranian/Islamic stance (Mottahedeh).<sup>37</sup> What should also be taken into consideration about the promotion of Nafisi and her work by Benador is that, following Orientalist feminists, they played an active role in the propagation of the “liberating Muslim women” thesis, of which *RLT* is a prime example.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the most telling extrinsic indicator of Nafisi’s controversial collaboration with neoconservatives is her induction into the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, where she was hired while Paul Wolfowitz, himself a staunch follower of Bernard Lewis, was Dean before he became a key advocate of the invasion of Iraq as Deputy Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2005 under George W. Bush (Byrne “A Collision”). As Rowe has suggested, for someone with a PhD in English literature “to hold her appointment in SAIS, a school for the training of diplomats, certainly does pose a set of intriguing questions” (256).

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<sup>37</sup> As a case in point, in May 2006, Canada’s *National Post* published a sensational piece by Benador Associates and Amir Taheri, a prominent Iranian-born U.S. neoconservative claiming that Iran’s Parliament had passed a sumptuary law requiring Jewish citizens to wear a yellow insignia – reminiscent of the policies of Nazi Germany (Taheri). The story, as it turned out, was a scandalous hoax, which was quickly discredited and Benador Associate admitted to planting the piece (Kelly).

<sup>38</sup> As another case in point, Mottahede refers to an article by the firm’s agent, Eleana Benador, in which, contemplating the participation of an Afghan and an Iraqi woman in the 2004 Athens Olympics, she comments: “We are winning!... We have rescued from the hands of those extremists these women who have regained their status as human beings, and who are learning now what it is to be treated with respect and dignity” (Mottahedeh).

Even if one dismisses the naiveté of conspiracy theories regarding Nafisi's neoconservative associations, one could still effectively argue that her work is one based on shared political sensibilities.

There is very little discord among critics concerning the significance of Nafisi's association with American political and intellectual neoconservative circles in the promotion and reception of her memoir. However, this neo-conservative affiliation is not restricted to Nafisi's personal politics. Rather, it permeates the text itself and is especially embedded in Nafisi's descriptions of Iranian women (as demonstrated above) and her discussions of particular Western classics.

One of the most significant ways in which the text promotes neoconservative agendas is the recurrent rendering of Islam as tantamount to Marxism and Communism in "its totalitarian intent, methods, and effects" (DePaul "Re-Reading" 77). In her discussion of the political milieu that dominated the immediate post-Revolution sociopolitical landscape in Iran, Nafisi's memoir exhibits a tendency to equate the predominant Islamic movement of the time with those of the Marxist and Communist parties. While it is true that the Islamic, Marxist, and Communist groups formed the major opposition to the monarchy of the time, there were radical differences that distinguished them from one another in both ideology and their *modus operandi*. However, as is characteristic of the (neo-)Orientalist discourse, this heterogeneity is effaced in *RLT* in favor of a simplistic rendition of them all as "anti-American".

In the chapter on *Gatsby*, Nafisi repeatedly interlaces Marxist terminology with her descriptions of what she sees as Islamism, concluding that *Gatsby* offended the sensibilities of both her Muslim and Marxist students for its immorality and materialism respectively (DePaul "Re-Reading" 77). In an important passage, Nafisi not only conflates Islam with Marxism, but, characteristically, dehumanizes her "political" students by denying them such primordial human emotions as love and passion and defining them only within the confines of a frenzied politics:

My students were slightly baffled by *Gatsby*. The story of an idealistic guy, so much in love with this beautiful rich girl who betrays him, could not be satisfying to those for whom sacrifice was defined by words such as masses, revolution and Islam. Passion and betrayal were for them political emotions, and love far removed from the stirrings of Jay Gatsby for Mrs. Tom Buchanan. (108)

In a similar vein, she equates the two ideologies once again when juxtaposing the proletarian author, Mike Gold, with Fitzgerald, claiming that “The revolution Gold desired was a Marxist one and ours was Islamic, but they had a great deal in common, in that they were both ideological and totalitarian” (109). Speaking of the “revolutionary” clichés used by some of her students, she comments sarcastically that “One had a feeling ... that they spoke from a script, playing characters from an Islamized version of a Soviet novel” (165), thus stressing the link between the Islamic Iran and the Marxist Soviet. DePaul has argued that Nafisi is “at her most neoconservative” in her conflation of Islam and Marxism and her invocation of “Soviet totalitarianism” to describe Islam, since “portraying Islamism glibly as an equivalent to Marxism invokes a particularly troubling paradigm for global conflict, the Cold War” and exerts “a powerful effect on many American readers, suggesting an imperative to confront an ideologically opposed enemy that is armed (or soon to be) and extremely dangerous” (“Re-Reading” 80).

Another instance in which the Islam vis-à-vis Marxism comparison is invoked is in Nafisi’s discussion of Nabokov’s novels, especially *Lolita*. Nafisi approaches *Lolita* both as an artistic expression of female victimization by patriarchal authority, as well as a story that, is essentially anti-totalitarian (DePaul “Re-Reading” 80). In discussing the works of Nabokov, Nafisi constantly stresses what she deems a strain of resistance against totalitarianism and oppression as essential in appreciation of Nabokov’s novels. In her discussion of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nafisi likens the arbitrary authorities with Russian names that have imprisoned and want to execute the protagonist, Cincinnatus, to Muslim authorities, remarking that “There was not much difference between our jailers and Cincinnatus's executioners. They invaded all private spaces and tried to shape every gesture ... and that in itself was another form of

execution" (77). In a similar vein, Iranian authorities are constantly likened to Humbert Humbert, Lolita's rapist, with references to Lolita's tantalizing nature, for viewing women as capable of the sexual provocation of the opposite sex (DePaul "Re-Reading" 80). Thus, not only does *RLT* associate post-Revolution Iran with Nabokov's theme of resistance and female victimization, in so doing it invokes the menace of communist authoritarianism by associating post-Revolution Iran with the Soviet Union "thus hinting at a threat of global magnitude that conceivably contributed to American readers' fears" (DePaul "Re-Reading" 81).

Nafisi's neoconservative leanings are also manifest in the ill-informed rendition of the pre-Revolution Iran as a benign and democratic golden age compared to the post-Revolution era in *RLT*. This is particularly evident in references to the highly exaggerated condition of Iranian women prior to the Revolution, a neo-conservative line of thinking made famous by Jeane J. Kirkpatrick (DePaul "Re-Reading" 81).<sup>39</sup> In her 1979 *Dictatorships and Double Standards*, Kirkpatrick thus expresses her underlying thesis:

Only intellectual fashion and the tyranny of Right/Left thinking prevent intelligent men of good will from perceiving the facts that traditional authoritarian governments are less repressive than revolutionary autocracies, that they are more susceptible of liberalization, and that they are more compatible with U.S. interests. (72)

Kirkpatrick further criticizes the Carter administration's foreign policy for being "unrealistic" and for having failed to prevent "the replacement of moderate autocrats friendly to American interests with less friendly autocrats of extremist persuasion" (61). *Reading Lolita in Tehran* does echo this latter neoconservative strain manifestly in exaggerating and romanticizing the pre-Revolutionary "freedoms" that Iranian people enjoyed while turning a blind eye both to the

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<sup>39</sup> Jeane J. Kirkpatrick (1926-2006) was Ronald Reagan's first ambassador in the United Nations. She was best known for the "Kirkpatrick Doctrine", which advocated U.S. support of anticommunist governments around the world, for which she was criticized by Noam Chomsky as the "Chief sadist-in-residence of the Reagan Administration" (*Turning the Tide* 8).



numerous atrocities perpetrated by the last monarchical regime<sup>40</sup> as well as the significant improvements in the social life of Iranian people, especially women, as noted earlier. Hence, “in tacitly excusing bad dictators rather than focusing on the superpowers that propped them up”, Nafisi invokes, while ironically trying to efface, one of the saddest chapters in the contemporary Iranian historico-political collective consciousness, i.e. the U.S. and Britain’s role in the coup d’état that overthrew Iran’s, and the Middle East’s, first prime minister and anti-colonialist, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq (DePaul “Re-Reading” 82).

### **From the Western Canon to the West’s Cannons**

One of the most contentious aspects of Nafisi’s memoir is her reliance on the pedagogy of canonical Western literature to her “girls” in her clandestine weekly sessions. To begin with, it bears noting that Nafisi’s primary assertion that the works of the authors she discusses in her secret class were “forbidden” in postrevolutionary Iran, is disingenuous. As Seyed Mohammad Marandi, a professor of English literature at the University of Tehran, has noted, far from the books being forbidden, in the same time span that Nafisi has written about there were “students at the University of Tehran who even wrote their theses on Nabokov, after checking out his novels from the university library” (182).

Like almost all other leitmotifs underlying the memoir, the discussion of Western literary classics in *RLT* has engendered plenty of critical controversy. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has earned much of its acclaim by dint of Nafisi’s corroboration of the power of imagination and literature (Koegeler 33). Many Western reviewers and critics have lauded *RLT* for demonstrating the “limitless”, “transformative”, “illuminating” and “democratic” power of Western literature and fiction (Atwood; Grogan 69; Flint; Hewett; Kakutani; Kamran; Yardley). The first four pages of the book acclaim it as a literary “masterpiece” and a remarkable testament to the power and significance of Western literature. Kate Flint, for instance, has summarized why the book has been so enthusiastically welcomed in the Western imaginary: its

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<sup>40</sup> Marandi, for instance, remarks how “thousands of people taking part in demonstrations throughout the country in support of Ayatollah Khomeini were killed on the streets” during the premiership of Iran’s last prime minister under the Shah, whom Nafisi mentions as a “a very democratic-minded and farsighted” person (102).

eye-opening quality, its appreciation of the taken-for-granted and liberating value of Western literature, and its resistance against oppression. Furthermore, she has built upon Nafisi's argument about the connection between reading Western literature, democratic ethics, and Western liberalism:

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is remarkable for the ways it lends new eyes to those of us who take the reading privileges of a Western democracy more or less for granted. Reading – presented, to be sure, by someone whose experience has made her a fervent advocate of Western liberalism – becomes simultaneously an escape from oppression, especially gender oppression; an intellectual transgression; and a promise that life might and can be otherwise. Reading provides liberation through the imagination. (512)

Nafisi's idea of teaching Western literature as a liberating democratic medium is echoed in the reviews of the memoir. Writing in the *Middle East Journal*, Cameron Kamran reiterated Nafisi's universalist Western humanist position on literature, remarking that for Nafisi Western literature "is a universal language that bridges cultures and instills a form of democracy by teaching us empathy for the complexities of the human condition" (512). Throughout her memoir, Nafisi portrays Western literature as a medium in resisting against what she sees as the tyranny of the postrevolutionary Iranian government.

Such views about teaching classical Western literature to Iranian girls, however, are enmeshed in their own problematics. Some of the most significant grounds that render Nafisi's literary pedagogy contentious are the intrinsic connection between teaching Western literature to Iranian girls and the promotion of cultural and political American hegemony, the colonial nature of much of the literature she teaches and preaches, and finally, her almost total disregard for or, arguably, ignorance of the native Persian literary tradition.

Nafisi's gamut of literary texts is composed of some of the most famous canonical novels arranged in a chronologically regressive order beginning with Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955 in Paris; 1958 in the U.S.) and followed in order by Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), James' *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square* (1878 and 1881), and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and

*Mansfield Park* (1813 and 1814). Even though Nafisi's account "devotes an inordinate number of pages to literary analysis of the Western works she and her students studied" (Ramazani "Persepolis" 279), critics have drawn attention to the total silence in her analyses about how the hermeneutics of Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James, and Austen have changed in the past few decades under the influences of such critical theories as deconstruction, feminism, New Historicism, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies (Rowe 263). Moreover, if there is any reference to critical theory in her narrative, "she follows the neoconservative tendency to dismiss different competing approaches as 'postmodern' or 'relativist'" (Rowe 263). This is best exemplified in Nafisi's reference to Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, which illustrates both her ignorance of and dismissive attitude towards any alternative readings of the works she teaches:

One day after class, Mr. Nahvi followed me to my office. He tried to tell me that Austen was not only anti-Islamic but that she was guilty of another sin: she was a colonial writer. I was surprised to hear this from the mouth of someone who until then had mainly quoted and misquoted the Koran. He told me that *Mansfield Park* was a book that condoned slavery, that even in the West they had now seen the error of their ways. What confounded me was that I was almost certain Mr. Nahvi had not read *Mansfield Park*.

It was only later, on a trip to the States, that I found out where Mr. Nahvi was getting his ideas from when I bought a copy of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. It was ironic that a Muslim fundamentalist should quote Said against Austen. It was just as ironic that the most reactionary elements in Iran had come to identify with and co-opt the work and theories of those considered revolutionary in the West. (290)

The excerpt is significant for various reasons and has, in fact, been dubbed "one of the most ironic moments of the memoir" (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 637). In line with Nafisi's representation of Muslim students as philistine, she represents Mr. Nahvi – in whom Nafisi is "unable to find a single redeeming quality" (290) – as someone who can "quote and misquote

Koran", but is not expected to be conversant with Western critical theories, and thus his reading and quoting Said is cast as an aberration. Similarly troubling is Nafisi's accusation that Mr. Nahvi had not even read *Mansfield Park*, which reminds one of Said's contention that Orientalists simply "knew" what the Orientals were like. The double irony that Nafisi notes is, ironically, overridden by a triple irony that undermines Nafisi's reading of the event. Firstly, it is the "fundamentalist" student, rather than the secular, U.S.-trained English professor, who is conversant with the most recent literary criticism in the West. Second, as the bulk of postcolonial critiques of Austen's corpus demonstrate, Said's reading of Austen's *Mansfield Park* as implicated in British colonial politics is warranted and its inclusion in the debates surrounding the work is far from unjustified. Third, and perhaps the greatest irony, is that Nafisi's own memoir is "as easily appropriated as Said's work, this time by westerners seeking a justification to vilify Islam wholesale" (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 637).

Paramount in the perusal and construal of any work of literature and art is the locus in which the work is both constructed and consumed. The significance of a writer's, and consequently of the readership's, sociopolitical and geographical situatedness in the appreciation of any given work of literature cannot be overstated. Cheryl Miller has pointed out how "the act of reading is always colored by our place in the world" (93). Similarly, Row argues that the popularity of *RLT* is significantly germane to the manner in which the meaning of literary productions are contingent upon the location where they are perused and observes that "Written by an Iranian immigrant educated and living in the United States and published only in English for Anglophone readers, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* relies primarily on its location within the United States" (258). In this light, throughout her memoir Nafisi demonstrates her awareness of "the place one's social location may play in the reading life" (Bush "Bookish Lives" 32). The significance of "time and place" in appreciation of works of literature is manifest, more than anywhere else, in the title of the book and thus accounts for *Reading Lolita "in Tehran"* as opposed to simply *Reading Lolita* (DePaul "Re-Reading" 75). Significantly, in the opening pages of the memoir Nafisi delineates how the setting in which a work of literature is perused can shape the meaning of the text. Hence, she writes early in her memoir:

It is of *Lolita* that I want to write, but right now there is no way I can write about that novel without also writing about Tehran. This, then, is the story of *Lolita* in Tehran, how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*. (6)

Along the same lines, Rowe has argued that one of the strong appeals of Nafisi's utilization of canonical Western literature is the fact that "they do new political work in the radically different cultural context" of the Islamic Republic of Iran (263). It is on the same grounds that *The Great Gatsby*, hardly a subject of controversy in Western colleges, turns out to be the most contentious choice on Nafisi's syllabus for a class she teaches in Tehran in the thick of a fledgling revolution fiercely claimed by stalwart adherents of the rivaling antithetical ideologies of Marxism and Islam, both, according to Nafisi, taking issue with the book respectively for the unwarranted materialism and "idealized portrayal of Gatsby's aristocratic pretensions and corrupt accumulation of wealth" as well as the moral degeneracy of its antagonist exemplified in "romanticizing the adulterous relationship between Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan" (Rowe 263). By the same token, just as reading Nabokov's *Lolita* in Tehran infuses the very act of reading with an almost totally distinct set of semantic significations, the manner in which *RLT* is perused and perceived in the West is also bound to be tellingly discrete from the way it is construed in the East and especially in the Muslim world.

Besides the aforementioned question of Iranian/Muslim women and the need to "liberate" them, promoting the moral supremacy and universal ascendancy of Western values epitomized in the Western literary canon, and presenting them "as being both necessary and sufficient" is another major way by which *RLT* buttresses neoconservative agendas (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 637).<sup>41</sup> The reinvigoration of the white, bourgeois, and predominantly androcentric Western canon from the pen of a female expatriate Iranian writer can be appropriated as "fodder in the U.S. culture wars" by the U.S. neo-conservatives seeking to "circumvent the insights of feminist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies" and hence reinforce the

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<sup>41</sup> As far as the relationship between neo-Orientalist memoirs and the question of women in Muslim societies is concerned, the idea was elaborated in the section regarding the Iranian Woman Question.

Western supremacist and exclusionist approach to multicultural perspectives (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 637-39). On the same grounds, Rowe has argued that *RLT* “is an excellent example of how neoliberal rhetoric is now being deployed by neoconservatives and the importance they have placed on cultural issues” (253).

Inspected from the vantage point of the nexus between culture – particularly literature – and imperialism, as spelled out in Edward Said’s seminal *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), works such as *RLT* engage concurrently in a double performance. This duality consists of the affirmation of the white, Americo-European culture and civilization as well as the negation of native, non-white, predominantly Muslim cultures and civilizations. Such hegemonic discourses, as Said argues, bank so much on a perdurable and influential rhetoric of “American specialness, altruism, and opportunity” that the very concept of imperialism is almost rendered anachronistic in the mainstream discussions of such works. Nafisi’s memoir epitomizes this frame of reference by depicting America as much a utopic state as Iran is rendered dystopic. As Said has averred:

American attitudes to American “greatness,” to hierarchies of race, to the perils of other revolutions (the American revolution being considered unique and somehow unrepeatable anywhere else in the world) have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured, the realities of empire, while apologists for overseas American interests have insisted on American innocence, doing good, fighting for freedom. (*Culture and Imperialism* 8)

The most direct instance of this binary opposition is in Nafisi’s proclamation that “We in ancient countries have our past — we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgia about the promise of the future” (109). It goes without saying that Nafisi’s juxtaposition of Iran and America is in line with the Orientalist assumption of the essential difference between the West and its Other. In a similar vein, Nafisi’s repeated references to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (42, 281, 341, 47) – one of the key phrases in the United States Declaration of Independence – and her depictions of Iran as the exact opposite of

it reinforces this binary. This binary is perpetuated, perhaps more than anything else, through characters either from or associated with both countries.

Throughout the narrative, non-Westernized Iranian men are likened to Humbert in their confiscation (one of Nafisi's favorite terms) of personal freedoms, their towering omnipresence, and their pedophilic sexual perversion. Discussing "the hypocrisy of some officials and activists in various Muslim associations" with Nassrin, one of her seven students, Nafisi tells us that Nassrin's youngest uncle, "a very pious man, had sexually abused her when she was barely eleven years old" (48). Nassrin's suitor is no better either. He "stare[s] at women in the way ... in the way my uncle touched me" (323). Sanaz's life is similarly "dominated" by "two very important men" one of whom is her "spoiled" nineteen-year-old brother whose "one obsession in life was Sanaz" and who "had taken to proving his masculinity by spying on her, listening to her phone conversations, driving her car around and monitoring her actions" (16). Yassi, another one of Nafisi's students, was "shielded" all her life, and "was never let out of sight; she never had a private corner in which to think, to feel, to dream, to write" (32). In stark contrast to Nassrin's "Muslim" pedophilic uncle is Yassi's "favorite" uncle who lives in the United States and pays occasional visits to Iran. Nafisi's description of Yassi's uncle is significant in its own right:

He was patient, attentive, encouraging and at the same time a bit critical, pointing out this little flaw, that weakness. Yassi was elated whenever he came for visits, or on the rare occasions he wrote home or called from the States and asked specifically to talk to her. He was the only one who was allowed to put ideas into Yassi's head without any reproach. And he did put ideas into her head. First, he had encouraged her to continue her musical practices; then he had said, Why not go to the university in Tehran? Now he advised her to continue her studies in America. Everything he told Yassi about life in America – events that seemed routine to him – gained a magical glow in her greedy eyes. (270)

One cannot but have the immediate impression that the reported sophistication and moral influence of Yassi's uncle is due, more than anything else, to his connection to the United States. It remains for Yassi's U.S.-based uncle – she has another uncle with “fanatical religious leanings” with whom she partly lives – to come and “put ideas into her head” and lead her to America. Towards the end of the memoir, we hear about Yassi's uncle again:

Every time her uncle visited Iran – and it was not often – he provoked doubts and questions in Yassi, who would be plagued for weeks with vague and uneasy longings that made her yearn, without exactly knowing what for. She knew now that she must go to America, as she had known when she was twelve that she must play the forbidden musical instrument. (285)

Once again, it seems that “going to America” is the final stage in the liberation and intellectual development of the young and ambitious Yassi, just like practicing “forbidden” music and going to the University of Tehran have been. In the same vein, when another one of Nafisi's students, Sanaz, tells the class about her suitors, Manna responds, “If I were you, I'd get out of this country while I can ... Don't stay here and don't marry anyone who'll have to stay here. You'll only rot” (286). The circle of liberation seems to be complete only when the “girls”, like Nafisi, have made the final move and left Iran for the “safety” of the West:

Nassrin, I know, arrived safely in England. I do not know what happened to her after that. Mitra left for Canada a few months after we moved to the U.S. She used to write me e-mails or call me regularly, but I have not heard from her for a long time. Yassi tells me that she enrolled in college and now has a son. I heard from Sanaz, too, when I first came to the States. She called me from Europe to inform me that she was now married and intended to enroll at the university. But Azin tells me she dropped that plan and is keeping house, as the saying goes. (342)

In line with Nafisi's representations of things Iranian and their juxtaposition with the United States are her many references to the Iranian Revolution, which – unlike its “exceptional” American counterpart quoted above – is depicted not as a result of complex sociopolitical



dynamics, but as merely driven by ferocious religious fervor and as anachronistic. In reading Nafisi's account of post-revolution Iran, one has to bear in mind Keshavarz's axiom that "In general, revolutions do not present their perspectives politely and peacefully. They throw them at you. Where peaceful means have not failed, a revolution does not take place. In Iran of the 1970s, peaceful means had failed" (*Jasmine and Stars* 10).

Characteristically for Orientalist representations, the Revolution and the succeeding governments are not portrayed as made up of individual people with different viewpoints and agendas dealing with internal dissent and foreign intervention, sociopolitical changes, or internal dynamics. Instead, they are portrayed as a monolithic and homogeneous entity, rather than as the struggles of a traditional society undergoing a major sea change and a political paradigm shift. Nafisi uses the terms "the Revolution", "the Islamic Republic", "the Revolutionary Committee", and "the Revolutionary Guards" haphazardly and most often they are anthropomorphized in the figures of Ayatollah Khomeini, the blind sensor, and other characters, such as her "fanatic" students, loathed by Nafisi. The Revolution and its foregoing synonyms are treated monolithically, that is they are often portrayed as having singular intention, task, and agenda. Thus, "the Revolution imposed the scarf on others" (13), it "had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream" (144) and its "first task had been to blur the lines and boundaries between the personal and the political, thereby destroying both" (173).

Never does Nafisi make even a single reference to the fact that from the very outset "the Revolution" was so radically differently interpreted by its very "founders" and that they had very different, and sometimes conflicting, agendas about such major issues as the relationship with the West, the War, the Hostage Crisis, and the imposition of the veil. Instead, "The Islamic Republic" is depicted as a destructive monolithic force preying upon people's lives and bent on their destruction. Manna claims, for instance, that "About a year after the revolution, my father died of a heart attack, and then the government confiscated our house and our garden and we moved into an apartment" (12), thus wrongly insinuating that without the father, the family is weak and the government confiscates the weaker members' property.

“The Revolution” and its “founders” are also represented as death-obsessed. Nafisi deems, for instance, the public funeral services for the founders of the Revolution attended, at times, by millions of people,<sup>42</sup> not as signs of their respect for the deceased person and their support for the Revolution, but as “a symptom of the symbiosis between the revolution's founders and death” (90), or what she alternatively calls “the death wish of the regime” (209).

However, these occasions are not only manifestations of the Revolution’s thanatophilia; they also provide “the one place where people mingled and touched bodies and shared emotions without restraint or guilt. There was a wild, sexually flavored frenzy in the air” (90). If anything, viewing people mourning in a public funeral as an occasion for Iranians to vent their “perverted” sexuality reveals much more about Nafisi than the funeral attendants, and, ironically, sheds light on her claim that “our culture shunned sex because it was too involved with it” (304), rendering the claim self-reflexive. After all, it was Nafisi who had for “the first time ... experienced the desperate, orgiastic pleasure of this form of public mourning” (90).<sup>43</sup>

Nafisi’s simplistic Orientalist representations of the Iranian Revolution are extended to his view of the war, which Iraq and its Western allies imposed on Iran. To begin with, Nafisi claims that Iran was the “perpetrator” of the war (209), a view shared perhaps only by Saddam Hussein, and refuted by the United Nations Iran–Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG). Discussing the life of Henry James, whom Nafisi admires and regards as a hero, Nafisi describes how he was involved in writing “war propaganda from the fall of 1914 until December 1915”, “appeal[ed] to America to join the war”, and became “so actively involved in the war effort” (214). She then continues to explain the whys and wherefores of James’s involvement with the war:

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<sup>42</sup> Even Nafisi admits that “millions had come from all around the country” to participate in Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral (*Reading Lolita* 245).

<sup>43</sup> Similar to Nafisi’s sexual reading of the public funerals is her comment on the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini. When the millions of funeral participants were sprayed “at intervals with water to cool them off” because of the extreme heat, Nafisi sees the effect as making the scene “oddly sexual” (244).

One reason for his involvement was the carnage, the death of so many young men, and the dislocation and destruction. While he mourned the mutilation of existence, he had endless admiration for the simple courage he encountered, both in the many young men who went to war and in those they left behind. (214)

None of James's actions and his war-mongering efforts are condemned; if anything, they are rendered as patriotic and heroic. Nonetheless, throughout her memoir Nafisi describes Iranian soldiers fighting in the war as brainwashed, deluded, and driven by fanaticism. Similarly, she mentions that James's "two younger brothers fought with courage and honor" in the war, apparently – unlike Iranian soldiers – not influenced by any form of propaganda and merely fighting out of their commitment to the principles of justice and freedom (213). In her many references to the war, Nafisi unquestioningly propagates some of the most hackneyed myth surrounding the Iran-Iraq war. She claims, for instance, that on the Iranian front "any and all methods" were utilized to achieve their goals, including

what became known as "human wave" attacks, where thousands of Iranian soldiers, mainly very young boys ranging in age from ten to sixteen and middle-aged and old men, cleared the minefields by walking over them. The very young were caught up in the government propaganda that offered them a heroic and adventurous life at the front and encouraged them to join the militia, even against their parents' wishes. (208)

Nafisi goes on to reiterate another notorious myth about the young soldiers "who had been mobilized by the excitement of carrying real guns and the promise of keys to a heaven where they could finally enjoy all the pleasures from which they had abstained in life" (209). Seyed Mohammad Marandi, himself a veteran of that war, has called Nafisi's claims "ludicrous", deeming the "absurdity of such claims" characteristic of Iranian native Orientalist discourse (184).

Nafisi's glorification of the U.S. has a particular currency in the post-9/11 milieu in which the "nearly hysterical patriotism" of the U.S. "has taken on a peculiarly isolationist aura that is at the same time compounded by a deep investment in its own international deployment" as

well as a “rhetorical emphasis on the United States as the democratic model for the rest of the world” (Rowe 253). This “mythology” has precedents in such ideologies as 19<sup>th</sup>-century “Manifest Destiny” and the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century “March of the Anglo-Saxon” inasmuch as they are contingent upon “a U.S. democratic utopianism built upon the heritage of Western Civilization” (Rowe 253).

Rowe has observed that “The tendency to transform personal memoirs, however idiosyncratic, into ethnographies of foreign peoples has long been recognized as integral to cultural imperialism, especially in the history of the literature of exploration and travel” (260). It should, however, be noted that often such observations of purported travel writers reveal more about the observer than the observed. American reviewers such as Heather Hewett, for instance, have lauded the book, citing *RLT* as a testament to the universality of Western values: “Nafisi’s memoir makes a good case for reading the classics of western literature no matter where you are ... ‘Reading Lolita in Tehran’ provides a stirring testament to the power of Western literature to cultivate democratic change and open-mindedness” (Hewett). It is, in fact, this particular perusal of the text that Donadey has dubbed “a danger of conservative appropriation” by American reviewers, critics, and think tanks alike (637). It is not surprising that not even a single one of the rave reviews has commented on the book’s implications in the U.S. and for Iranian and Muslim communities. As Said argues, traditionally and historically major critics and scholars have tended to ignore and bypass critical discussions of colonialism and imperialism (*Culture and Imperialism* 65).

The most significant criticism of *RLT*’s appropriation by and collaboration with belligerent neo-conservatism in the U.S. has been voiced by Professor Hamid Dabashi in his seminal essay, *Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire* (2006).<sup>44</sup> Dabashi’s critique of *RLT* merits special attention for two major reasons. For one thing, like Nafisi, Dabashi is an Iranian immigrant in the U.S. – and in fact one of the most prominent Iranian-American

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<sup>44</sup> The terms often utilized in postcolonial contexts to refer to native intellectuals imparting knowledge about their home countries is “native informant”. However, as Dabashi’s article is crucial in understanding Nafisi’s memoir, his variation of the term, i.e. “native informer”, will be drawn upon in the current discussion.

exilic intellectuals – and a professor of English literature and Iranian Studies.<sup>45</sup> For another, his essay on *RLT* is the most critical and the most cited piece of scholarly writing on the memoir thus far. In his influential essay, Dabashi has argued that even though the cluster of post-9/11 neo-Orientalist memoirs epitomized by *RLT* point to some legitimate concerns, “yet [they] put that predicament squarely at the service of the US ideological psy-op, militarily stipulated in the US global warmongering” (“Native Informers”). Concurrent with the U.S. belligerency and militarism reaching its apex in recent history, and with the prospect of yet another U.S. war against Iran looming large (Hersh), *RLT* has tremendously cultivated the U.S. – and by extension the global – public opinion against both Iran and Islam (“Native Informers”). Rowe has also argued that even though he does not advocate the contention that “there is a direct relationship between Nafisi’s work and U.S. plans for military action in Iran”, he does believe that *RLT* “represents the larger effort of neoconservatives to build the cultural and political case against diplomatic negotiations” with Iran (254). Fitzpatrick has also discussed the connection between *RLT* and advancing the hegemonic and militarist agenda of the U.S. averring that:

This portrayal of the Muslim world as holding values completely antithetical to what are seen as American values helps to explain why Americans come to see the overthrow of regimes such as Saddam Hussein’s or Mahmoud Ahmedinjad’s as a moral obligation, and not just one that they see to be in their own country’s interest. The idea that in invading and occupying another country we are ‘freeing people’ plays well, and becomes itself the focus of American preoccupation with violent regime change. Readers can point to Nafisi’s book as justification for invasion: ‘you see, they are brutally oppressive there ... I read about it in this book’. (247)

This is by no means to refute the legitimacy of resistance against tyranny or struggle for a more democratic society and more expansive civil rights. One cannot concur more with Dabashi that, in the context of *RLT* as a case in point, the struggles and aspirations of Iranian women of diverse ideological convictions are not only absolutely legitimate but an exigent imperative;

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<sup>45</sup> Hamid Dabashi is currently the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where he has taught for many years alongside the late Edward Said.

nonetheless, what is deemed pernicious is “when these perfectly legitimate critiques mutate into entirely illegitimate formulations at the service of facilitating the US global domination” (Dabashi and Khosmood).

Paul Berman, a well-known American political theoretician who also advocated the invasion of Iraq ("Why Germany") and justified it on the pretext of the seemingly benign ideology of “liberal interventionism” and the fight against “Islamic authoritarianism”, actually utilizes *RLT* in his book as an exemplar of resisting autochthonous tyranny (*Power and the Idealists* 152-71). Placed in the broader framework of his discussion and his former advocacy of the invasion of Iraq, Berman’s invocation of Nafisi’s memoir and his endorsing of “the general liberal values represented by the Anglo-American authors she discusses” (Rowe 262) is only suggestive of another military intervention on grounds of saving them from their own plight and promoting liberal and democratic freedom. Berman also uses Nafisi’s account as an exemplar of the transfiguration of people with formerly leftist leanings to (neo)conservative persuasions, a coming-of-age narrative as it were, and in doing so he does, in quite an uncritical and unquestioning manner, perpetuate some of the most absurd myths propagated by *RLT*, claiming, for instance, that “The Islamists established the practice of suicide bombings as early as 1979, the year of their triumph” or writes of young Iranian soldiers marching into Iraqi minefields “with keys dangling from their necks to symbolize the opening of the gates of heaven” (*Power and the Idealists* 160).

In his famously uninhibited critique of *RLT*, Dabashi enunciates how Nafisi’s memoir – in tandem with her collaboration with American cultural and political neo-conservative politics – has turned her into the latter-day embodiment of colonial native informers “facilitating public consent to imperial hubris” ("Native Informers"). According to Dabashi, as the epitome of “native informers turned comprador intellectuals”, Nafisi has achieved three simultaneous objectives “with one stroke”:

- (1) systematically and unfailingly denigrating an entire culture of revolutionary resistance to a history of savage colonialism; (2) doing so by blatantly advancing

the presumed cultural foregrounding of a predatory empire; and (3) while at the very same time catering to the most retrograde and reactionary forces within the United States, waging an all out war against a pride of place by various immigrant communities and racialised minorities seeking curricular recognition on university campuses and in the American society at large.

As the "*locus classicus* of the ideological foregrounding of the US imperial domination at home and abroad", *RLT* has achieved the abovementioned objectives through three simultaneous moves: by relying on a "collective amnesia" of the history of U.S. imperial hegemony; by systematically appropriating what are essentially legitimate causes for illegitimate ends; and by "seeking to provoke the darkest corners of the Euro-American Oriental fantasies" through the modus operandi of English literature, facilitated by deliberate positioning of the authorial voice as a latter-day Scheherazade (Dabashi "Native Informers"). Fitzpatrick has argued that the power that "native" authorial voice and personal testimony accounts exert is quite significant in native informer's accounts as it lends credibility to such works "and underscores the idea that regime change is not only in the strategic interest of the USA, but is also our moral obligation (as the more civilized power) toward the citizens suffering under these regimes" (246).

Issued from one of the most prominent exilic intellectuals in the U.S., Dabashi's critique of *RLT* as detrimental to the aspirations and struggles of minority writers who seek inclusion and recognition in the American literary curriculum and market bears particular significance, as it sheds light on an important facet of the memoir that has gone mostly unheeded by other observers. Along these lines, Dabashi has argued that part of *RLT's* "complicity" in promoting Western hegemony is advocating the ascendancy and supremacy of Western classics as arbiters of universal values at a juncture when at long last decades of struggle by postcolonial, black, and Third World scholars and feminists, as well as racialized minorities has come to fruition with the introduction of "a modicum of attention to world literatures" ("Native Informers"). Nafisi's advocacy of the Western literary culture<sup>46</sup> – "especially in the Euroamerican examples

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<sup>46</sup> Or at least how she uses her literary choices, i.e. more as tokens of "universal" Western cultural tropes (individualism, romance, freedom) than the complexities and criticism often available in these texts.

she uses to organize her book, appeals powerfully to liberal cultural values in ways specifically geared to attract intellectuals disaffected by the so-called culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s" (253). If one concurs with Said's aphorism that "Nations themselves *are* narrations", then one can also acknowledge how "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging" (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii) is inextricably yoked to the idea of imperialism and the destiny of disenfranchised minorities, as a microcosm of the non-Western world.

For Dabashi, the achievement of the three foregoing objectives, particularly the undermining of consistent struggles of postcolonial and minority writers for curricular recognition, seems even more untenable, a fact that he considers "quite a feat for an ex-professor of English literature with not a single credible book or scholarly credential to her name other than *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" ("Native Informers"). However, in tandem with the denigration of Iranian and Islamic cultures and feminist causes, *RLT*'s equally significant implication is the dismissal and denigration of rivaling nonwhite, immigrant cultures, racialized minorities, and disenfranchised communities. Given the unprecedented support for and promotion of Nafisi by conservative U.S. think tanks, this conclusion sounds quite tenable.

Paramount in the analysis of works like Nafisi's is the pivotal function of U.S.-based expatriate intellectuals in promoting the ideological foregrounding of American, and by extension, Western hegemony given the globalized and transcultural nature of the empire-building enterprise. In this scheme of things, the prevalent mode of Third World comprador intellectualism facilitates the transmission of the so-called native knowledge, as well as the transmutation of legitimate social causes – especially as regards the question of women's rights – into faddish the main function of which is promoting the ideological and cultural foregrounding of an essentially imperialistic agenda. This recruiting of native comprador intellectuals accelerated significantly owing both to the Western interest in Islam and the Middle East reaching its crescendo, as well as such "liberal interventionist" U.S. enterprises as the so-called "war on terror" in the aftermath of 9/11. The native intellectuals' major mission, then, was to "feign authority, authenticity, and native knowledge" so as to inform the Western



audience of the deplorable state of their countries of provenance in the way of justifying the hegemonic agendas of the U.S. under the pretext of humanitarian and benign liberation of such nations from their own evil (Dabashi "Native Informers").

The problematics posed by Nafisi's work, therefore, are not particularly restricted to questions of the substance of her narrative or the whys and wherefores of her vitriol against certain aspects of Iranian and Muslim life and culture. After all, as Said has aptly argued, authors are not simply mechanically shaped by their ideological, class, or economic persuasions, but are rather "very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure" and their works derive, to various degrees, from their historical experience (*Culture and Imperialism* xxii).

As long as the authenticity of comprador intellectuals' accounts is concerned, Dabashi asserts that like all forms of "propaganda and disinformation", *RLT* is predicated on "an element of truth" ("Native Informers"). The native informer's task, therefore, is to package that element of truth in the manner that best serves the interests of the empire "in the disguise of a legitimate critic of localised tyranny facilitating the operation of a far more insidious global domination--effectively perpetuating (indeed aggravating) the domestic terror they purport to expose" ("Native Informers"). Mitra Rategar has observed that "Despite ambivalence about Nafisi's own 'authenticity' as 'representative' Iranian woman, her representation of other women and their interests and desires is read [by reviewers] as 'authentic,' as is her account of the appropriate solutions" (111). Several critics have pointed out to the significance of Nafisi's own social background in both the degree of her narrative's authenticity as well as her stance on the gamut of issues she discusses in her memoir.

Nafisi belongs to an echelon of the Iranian society with which extremely few Iranians would identify. She comes from a highly privileged family background: her father was the Mayor of Tehran under the Shah (and was imprisoned on charges of embezzlement) (*Reading Lolita* 45), her mother had been a member of parliament during the Shah's reign (261), and her family's affluence enabled her to pursue her education in Switzerland, England, and the U.S.

(82).<sup>47</sup> The significance of Nafisi's family background is twofold. On the one hand, her family background, especially her family's affiliation with the regime of the last Shah is more than a matter of family history. It helps explain, at least partially, her romanticization of the pre-Revolution era as well as her advocacy for the regime change in Iran, another reason for her popularity among like-minded neo-conservatives who also have "a close alliance ... [with] the exile monarchists in Iranian diaspora community in the United States" (Bahramitash "The War on Terror" 230). On the other hand, her highly privileged background can account for her almost total lack of concern, shared by most ordinary Iranians, especially the female population, regarding such issues as the religious sensibilities of the Iranian society, access to free education and much higher social mobility and visibility for Muslim women as elaborated previously. Rowe has argued that even though Nafisi's memoir is far from representative of the lives of average Iranian women, "by stressing the diverse personalities of the women students in her private reading group, she offers the reader a deceptive synecdoche for Iranian women" (260). Rastegar has equally noted that while Nafisi and her girls are quite committed to the aesthetic merits of the Anglo-American canonical texts they peruse, "views of female students who actively supported the revolution are never described" (117).

In critiquing works such as *RLT*, the main issue is not whether one should criticize the Islamic Republic of Iran or not. Rather, as Fitzpatrick argues, the main concern is "the extent to which such works contribute to the normalization of the Islamic world as violent and irrational and of all Muslim women as oppressed by Muslim men and Muslim governments" (247). In other words, while criticizing the Islamic Republic of Iran, or any other country for that matter, is a perfectly legitimate given, works such as *RLT* voice this criticism "so simplistically that the conclusion readers reach is that forceful regime change and belligerence is the correct

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<sup>47</sup> Nafisi is not alone in her privileged background. Many other Iranian-American memoirists belonged to the upper echelons of the Iranian society before the Revolution. In her *Out of Iran: One Woman's Escape from the Ayatollahs* (1987), Sousan Azadi writes that "We were the rich of Iran, the ruling elite, the nation's leaders" (1). A similar sentiment is voiced by Cherry Mosteshar in her *Unveiled: One Woman's Nightmare in Iran* (1995): "There was a day, before the revolution of 1979, when I had been one of the richest young women on our street in wealthy North Tehran" (6).

response, indeed the only acceptable response” (Fitzpatrick 253). The foregoing argument should not be confused with falling into the trap of conspiracy theories. Rather, one can detect a collusion of interests between the interests of the U.S. global hegemony, the native/ethnic authors, and the post-9/11 American public.

### **Curricular and Minority Questions**

As a work written for a Western, especially American, audience, Nafisi’s systematic distortion and denigration of things Iranian and Islamic is only one manifestation of another major problematic in her work, that is “how utterly ignorant (indifferent or dismissive) [she is] of the massive debates of a counter-culture movement in the US academy, briefly code-named *multiculturalism*” (Dabashi "Native Informers"). As a “comprador intellectual”, Nafisi has joined forces with some of the most conservative figures opposing curricular (and by extension sociopolitical) changes by exclusively putting the Anglo-European literary imagination on a pedestal while concurrently placing “yet another non-European culture outside the fold of the literary--of the sublime and the beautiful” (Dabashi "Native Informers").

The discussion around curricular and sociopolitical inclusion is particularly significant in the U.S. context and, in fact, forms one of the principal discussions of Said’s theorization of the nexus between culture and imperialism. As Said has pointed out, there is a prevalent perception in the U.S. that upholds the Eurocentrality of literary imagination and defines cultural and humanistic study as “the recovery of the Judeo-Christian or Western heritage, free from native American culture (which the Judeo-Christian tradition in its early American embodiments set about to massacre) and from that tradition’s adventures in the non-Western world” (*Culture and Imperialism* 320). Paramount in this politics of cultural identity is, indeed, the role of literature, or more specifically, “the contest over what books and authorities constitute ‘our’ tradition” (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv), an exercise that Said deems “most debilitating”. Thus, the neo-conservative refutation of what it regards as alien to American cultural identity is predicated upon the presumption that in admitting multiculturalism and such disciplines as Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and Third World Studies into the curriculum,

“the American university sabotaged the basis of its supposed authority and is now ruled by a Blanquist cabal of intolerant ideologues who ‘control’ it” (*Culture and Imperialism* 321).

In 1989, Bernard Lewis, the senior American Orientalist luminary whom Nafisi acknowledges in her memoir as having “opened the door” for her, wrote a column for *The Wall Street Journal*, titled *Western Culture Must Go*, in the way of contribution to the debate surrounding modification of the Western canon. He addressed students and professors at Stanford and other American universities who had voted in favor of revising the curriculum with a view to including more writing by non-Anglo-European and women writers. Speaking as an omniscient Orientalist authority, Lewis cautions his addressees that the modification of university curricula is tantamount to the demise of Western culture, which in turn, means nothing less than restoration of such “non-Western” institutions as “slavery”, “the harem”, “child marriage”, and “widow burning” (Lewis). Lewis finishes his article by reiterating his basically fallacious premise that “if Western culture goes” with it go both its unique “curiosity” about other cultures and “our chance of learning about and learning from other cultures” (Lewis). One cannot but be astounded by the ultimate irony of arguing against the curricular inclusion of multicultural perspectives in order not to lose the chance of learning about other cultures. Lewis’s argument, as Said remarks, is quite symptomatic and is, in fact, “an indication not only of a highly inflated sense of Western exclusivity in cultural accomplishment, but also of a tremendously limited, almost hysterically antagonistic view of the rest of the world” (*Culture and Imperialism* 37).

Building on Lewis’s argument, Nafisi reiterates Bernard Lewis’s caveat in a significant passage in *RLT*. Thus she writes of her “girls”:

They had a genuine curiosity, a real thirst for the works of great writers, those condemned to obscure shadows by both the regime and the revolutionary intellectuals, most of their books banned and forbidden. Unlike in pre-revolutionary times, now the “non-Revolutionary writers,” the bearers of the canon, were the ones celebrated by the young: James, Nabokov, Woolf, Bellow, Austen and Joyce were revered names,

emissaries of that forbidden world which we would turn into something more pure and golden than it ever was or will be. (39)

The passage interweaves several methods used by Nafisi in her representations of the country. It reiterates one of the text's underlying themes: the fallacious claim that "works of great writers" were forbidden in Iran. It naively contrasts the pre- and post-Revolution times by their literary zeitgeists. After all, one could argue that the "non-Revolutionary writers" were favored by Nafisi and perhaps her select students, and if anything, the challenge posed by "Muslim" students – which Nafisi simply attributes to their lack of literary sensibilities – indicates that Nafisi's choices of texts were not as unanimously welcomed by her students as she implies. Also, Nafisi reserves this "genuine curiosity" for her "girls" while she persistently describes her "Muslim" students as philistine, which renders them even more analogous to Humbert who "was a villain because he lacked curiosity about other people and their lives" (48). Furthermore, by celebrating the "revered names" in the Western canon, Nafisi seems also to be cautioning her American readers, à la Lewis, that taking their "great writers" and the "bearers of the canon" for granted by the proponents of political correctness and multicultural ethics may well bring about an authoritarianism in the U.S. similar to the one Nafisi seems to observe in Iran (Rowe 267).

### **The Western Novel**

In her review of *RLT* for *The Christian Science Monitor*, Heather Hewett remarks that

Azar Nafisi's memoir makes a good case for reading the classics of western literature no matter where you are ... 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' provides a stirring testament to the power of Western literature to cultivate democratic change and open-mindedness.

While Hewett is probably right about Nafisi's intended argument, it is exactly such a conclusion that highlights the problematic embedded in Nafisi's stance. As Mailloux has demonstrated, "A very different lesson might in fact be taken from Fitzgerald's novel, its reception in Nafisi's memoir, and the reception of that memoir: Where you are does matter in reading Western

classics, indeed, in reading anything” (26). Significantly, Hewett’s assertion reverberates with Nafisi’s discussions of the supremacy and universality of the values expressed in Western classics. During the terror-inducing nights of Tehran’s bombardments by Iraq, Nafisi takes sanctuary in works of Western fiction, pondering and framing her ideas about the novel in particular:

Over the next decade and a half, more than anything else, I thought, wrote about and taught fiction. These readings made me curious about the origins of the novel and what I came to understand as its basically democratic structure. And I became curious as to why the realistic novel was never truly successful in our country. (187)

By associating Western novels with democratic ethics, *RLT* commends Western literature and civilization, promoting it as democratic and liberating for Iranians (DePaul “Re-Reading” 86). Also, by casting Western literature as a refuge for herself and other “progressive” Iranians, the memoir engages in “political work” by “posing the Western literary canon as the savior of Iranian women” (Balaghi and Toensing). This view is reinforced when one takes into consideration the fact that besides casting Western literature as a haven and a liberating medium, Nafisi also represents the very act of teaching it in Iran as a daunting feat or, as Keshavarz has put it, “something on the order of taming the savages” (*Jasmine and Stars* 19). In fact she goes as far as insinuating that “talking about Nabokov, Bellow and Fielding” was physically dangerous when she informs that she was doing it “at all costs to myself and them” (68). The irony, however, is that soon after its publication Nafisi’s memoir generated heated political debates about U.S. neo-conservatism, war propaganda, and U.S. foreign policy towards Muslim countries (Grogan 69).

Through the instrumentality of the novel genre, Nafisi reinforces the Orientalist binary of the superior, democratic West vs. the inferior, totalitarian Orient. What, however, is absent in Nafisi’s juxtaposition is how deeply rooted is the novel form in a colonial and imperialistic provenance, much more than in democratic aspirations. As Said argues, the genre saw its inauguration in England by *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), “a work whose protagonist is the founder

of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for Christianity and England” (*Culture and Imperialism* 70). In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said effectively delineates the convergence between the patterns of narrative authority that form the novelistic tradition and “a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism” (69). He infers, for example, that it is far from coincidental that by the mid-1800s when the novel had emerged as “the aesthetic form”, the British Empire had reached its apotheosis so much so that towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the novel was the centerpiece of the British history. Thus, Said argues that since the novel assumed such immense significance in “the condition of England” question, it can also be observed as participating in the country’s overseas imperial enterprises as well as in the formation of a paradigm of “imperial attitudes, references, and experiences” (*Culture and Imperialism* 71-72). The great European realist novel, for instance, achieved one of its fundamental objectives: “almost unnoticeably sustaining the society’s consent in overseas expansion, a consent that, in J. A. Hobson’s words, ‘the selfish forces which direct Imperialism should utilize the protective colours of ... disinterested movements’ such as philanthropy, religion, science and art” (*Culture and Imperialism* 19). For Said the novel – the cultural production of a bourgeois society – and imperialism are so intertwined as to render one inconceivable without the other:

Of all the major literary forms, the novel is the most recent, its emergence the most datable, its occurrence the most Western, its normative pattern of social authority the most structured; imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other. (*Culture and Imperialism* 70)

A sustained body of scholarship corroborates how the teaching of English literature to colonial subjects has been definitive to the British and American imperial enterprises. In her *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1990), Viswanathan has cogently demonstrated how the study of English literature “in both the matter and the manner of its literary claims, was instrumental in facilitating the British rule via the education of a generation of Indians who, as Macaulay put it, were ‘Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in

opinions, words and intellect” (Dabashi "Native Informers"). As demonstrated earlier, *RLT* is located at the same strategic confluence of literature and hegemony as its classic predecessors. Hence, one can observe that the position of eminence enjoyed by the novel form in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has found a ready equivalent in that of the post-9/11 Middle Eastern memoir in the U.S. and in the West in terms of its instrumentality in manufacturing imperial consent.

Investigating the nexus between *RLT* and U.S. neo-conservatism, as well as Said's concentration on the symbiotic interconnection between literary artifacts and hegemony, are by no means suggestive of analyzing a work of literature reductively and oversimplifying it to its author's sociopolitical affiliations or interpreting them merely in the context of the politics of their epoch. The point, rather, is to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between literature, or culture in a broader sense, and the idea of Empire, not to reduce novels, or any other literary form for that matter, to "subsidiary forms of class, ideology, or interest" (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 73). Far from reducing the literary to the political, the idea is to posit a political interlocutor next to the literary work "by way of a hermeneutic provocation of meaning and significance" (Dabashi "Native Informers"). Nor does comprehending the connection between the literary and the political diminish the value of works of art, and in this case, novels. Conversely, as Said points out, "because of their *worldliness*, because of their complex affiliations with their real setting" the artifacts studied in this light are "*more* interesting and *more* valuable as works of art" (*Culture and Imperialism* 13). In a similar vein, critiquing the Western canon is not tantamount to dismissing its literary or cultural merits. Rather, canonical texts must be perused and examined "with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented ... in such works" (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 66).



## Ahistorical Historicism and Learned Amnesia

Like all other neo-Orientalist narratives, *RLT* is characterized by a selective historicity and informed elimination of socio-historical and political facts. Such characteristic eliminations signify a totally misinformed, at best, and mendacious, at worst, knowledge on the part of the author, the immediate result of which is a travesty of the facts and a deformed picture of the social, political, and literary fabric in both pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran. In this light, several critics have delineated how Nafisi plays fast and loose with facts and thus offers a picture of the Iranian society that is highly misleading (Bahramitash "The War on Terror"; Dabashi and Khosmood; Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars*; Koegeler). In Fitzpatrick's words, "The problem with these atomized, isolated elements of truth (particularly when they are presented as the only moment we must attend) is that they offer us only atomized, isolated elements of solution" (254). This is more problematic when Nafisi predicates the 'truth' of her Oriental tale on her arrogation to academic excellence, asserting that "I am too much of an academic: I have written too many papers and articles to turn my experiences and ideas into narratives without pontificating" (266).<sup>48</sup> The selective historicity of Nafisi's memoir includes both broader historico-political frameworks indispensable for understanding her narrative, as well as more specific eliminations or distortions of events in the particular period she has written about. In an interview with Foaad Khosmood, Dabashi has pointed out some of the major acts of dehistoricization and decontextualization in *RLT*:

Nafisi not once refers to the historical trauma of all Iranians following the CIA sponsored coup of 1953 which toppled the democratically elected government of prime minister Mohammad Mussaddeq, not once to the subsequent mutation of Iran into a military base for the US involvement in Vietnam, not once about the fact that at the very time that these poor Iranians were screaming at the gates of the US embassy,

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<sup>48</sup> Nafisi's claim to academic prolificacy could not be more disingenuous. Before *RLT*, Nafisi's only other scholarly contribution had been a book on Nabokov written in Persian and published by the Iranian government's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Even though Nafisi often credits herself with being the author of *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels*, the book has never been translated into English or published in the West and the gesture smacks of self-promotion on part of Nafisi as a Nabokov expert.

there were in fact US plans for a possible military coup against the revolution.  
(Dabashi and Khosmood)

The concepts of selective memory and collective amnesia are tied to the notions of empire and hegemony. Against this backdrop Dabashi has argued that “dismantling the very notion of history and the fabrication of instant stories to fill its vacuum is one way of sustaining the imperial momentum”. This, in turn, accounts for the dearth of historical narratives and the proliferation of personal memoirs “which remains at a very superficial and entirely self-indulgent level” (Dabashi and Khosmood).

In her discussion of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Nafisi and her students see Lolita as a double victim both because of her life as a child being confiscated by her pedophilic stepfather, Humbert, and also because she is denied self-representation, the chance to author her life story. Hence, they develop a kind of sensitivity to the omissions of *Lolita*, arguing that they do not know much about her except for what Humbert chooses to divulge about her. This observation, in turn, leads them to the conclusion that absences can, in fact, be more significant than presences (Grogan 58). In a similar vein, reflecting on the two photographs of her “girls” – one with the girls observing *hijab* and the other one without – and those who are absent in them, Nafisi concludes, “Their absences persist, like an acute pain that seems to have no physical source. This is Tehran for me: its absences were more real than its presences” (5).

According to Nafisi, a good novel is “democratic” in that it “shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice” (132). Quite ironically though, and characteristically indeed, Nafisi commits the same omission apropos almost all the characters with whom she ideologically or politically disagrees and for some of whom she reserves a self-confessed “eternal contempt” (288), thus making the world created by *RLT* one in which absences predominate, much more than presences. If Nafisi “reads the omissions as strategic moves on Nabokov’s part to expose the dangers of solipsism” (Grogan 58), a reading deemed quite unconvincing by some critics, there seems to be no tenable grounds for the omission of ideologically different characters in *RLT* except to make them fit

into a black-and-white Orientalist binary. Therefore, a contrapuntal reading of Nafisi's *RLT* would reveal that even though Nafisi likens the Islamic Republic of Iran and its then-leader the late Ayatollah Khomeini to Humbert Humbert in terms of their imposition of their dreams on other people's lives, one could observe that in *RLT* Nafisi turns out to be the Humbert of her own story by depriving many characters of their voices, identities, and even names, not to mention her utter contempt and antipathy for them. Grogan has demonstrated that contrary to Nafisi's assertion, "Nabokov makes it easier to sympathize with Humbert, whom we know so much about, than with Lolita, who is virtually unknown to the reader, and the little bit of information he does share of her, reveals her to be 'a most exasperating brat'" (59).

The absences and lacunae in *RLT* are manifestations of one of the principal denominators of almost all Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourses: the simultaneous double function of affirmation (of the superior/colonial/Western) and negation (of its fabricated Other). Thus far, it has been demonstrated how *RLT* corroborates the supremacy of Western cultural and political values, as epitomized in what is represented as the universalism of the Western canon as well as its facilitation of imperial enterprises and manufacturing consent. In tandem with this affirmation, however, *RLT* engages in an act of almost total negation via historical erasure, narrow preferential selectivity, and informed elimination of the 'lesser' extreme on the (neo)Orientalist divide. This omission bears particular interpretive significance in the overall scheme of the narrative and has crucial epistemological implications. As Keshavarz has remarked:

Narratives achieve their sense of closure through an inherent claim to completeness. Whether they specify that or not, by virtue of telling a story, they take responsibility for giving their readers the whole truth. If they adopt a strategy of selective narration they should underline the fictive nature of their presentation or risk becoming a tool for erasure, a kind of silencing medium. (*Jasmine and Stars* 19)

In her memoir, Nafisi takes advantage of almost every opportunity to foreground and criticize the idea of censorship in post-Revolution Iran, making repeated disparaging references, for

instance, to one of the many particular figures for whom she reserves a special loathing, namely the “blind censor” (24, 25, 44, 74, 273, 315,38). In a statement that defies reason and seems more intended to ridicule than to inform, she claims early in her memoir that “The chief film censor in Iran, up until 1994, was blind. Well, nearly blind” (24); she continues the world she and her students lived in “was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor” (25). According to Nafisi, this censorship – which was in keeping with, and meant to promote, the state ideology – encroached upon people’s individual freedoms and deprived them of any real sense of agency and self-determination in their lives. What, however, is striking – besides the falsity of Nafisi’s initial statement – is the fact that Nafisi chooses to do the selfsame act by engaging in a much more substantial censorship of histories and narratives presented in her memoir.<sup>49</sup> It is, therefore, indispensable to peruse and analyze any given work of art with a view not only to what it puts forth but also what it leaves out.

One could argue that Nafisi’s memoir is characterized by a lack of the sense of wholeness and integrity. What the reader is presented with is disembodied fragments instead of an organic whole, black and white reductionism in place of kaleidoscopic diversity, and generalization and oversimplification in lieu of genuine analysis and contextualization. While Nafisi fulminates against the authorities who “censored the colors and tones of reality to suit their black-and-white world” (277), the landscape she presents of post-Revolution Iran and Islam could hardly be more monochromatic. Paramount in the negation strategy underlying *RLT* is the erasure of Iranian and Muslim women’s sociopolitical agency, elimination of Persian literary heritage and its dynamism, and acts of disinformation and falsification. Following on the discussion of the Western literary canon, it is apropos to examine the treatment of native Iranian/Persian literature in *RLT*.

The intellectual rewards of teaching and studying literature are a matter of broad consensus. What, however, remains conspicuous in *RLT* is not the teaching of literature per se as a “liberating” *modus operandi*; rather, the rub lies in the placing of canonical Western authors on the pedestal as arbiters of universal truth, while concurrently overlooking a native

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<sup>49</sup> This censorship, in fact, begins from the cropped cover image of the memoir as previously discussed.

literature that has produced such literary world giants as Rumi and Khayyam, to name only two of the best known and most translated in the West. In his discussion of English literature in *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that the alleged universalism of Western classics is so “Eurocentric in the extreme, as if other literatures and societies had either an inferior or a transcended value” (*Culture and Imperialism* 44). Ironically, Nafisi makes a passing reference to “the tales of our own lady of fiction, Scheherazade, from *A Thousand and One Nights*” (6) as an instance of subversive storytelling; nonetheless, the pedagogics of her curriculum includes works respectively by Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen, figures after whom, or their works, the book chapters are also named. This double act of simultaneous affirmation (of the Western canon) and negation (of native literature) “obscures any agency and sources of empowerment from within the Muslim literary traditions and politics even while Nafisi creates herself as a supposedly subversive storytelling Scheherazade” (Koegeler 32).

One of the features of the (neo)-Orientalist discourse is attributing what is simply too impressive to be discredited as inferior to a glorious, distant, and discontinued past. This is exactly how Persian literature and poetry are discussed in *RLT* (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 3). Investigating the repository of both classical and recent Orientalist texts makes it clear that almost all (neo)Orientalist discourses seek to efface any trace of cultural, artistic, or literary accomplishments and dynamism in the non-Western extreme of the Orientalist binary. On the extremely rare occasions when such accomplishments are broached, they are almost always ascribed to a bygone past. This is particularly true of Iranian history and culture. In the preponderance of Iranian-American memoirs, any discussion of history, arts, literature, or culture is either attributed to a ‘glorious’ ancient past, often the age of the Persian Empire, or on occasions to the more recent romanticized pre-Revolution era. As Keshavarz has argued, such literary productions

carry a powerful damaging subtext, a testimony to a fundamental corruption in the culture. In this narration, all good things in the Muslim Middle East belong to the past.

For in their current state these societies have been disembodied of their treasures, which have been replaced with unrelenting religious fanaticism. (*Jasmine and Stars* 70)

In *RLT*, this is true both of Iranian culture and history in the broader sense and of Persian literature, in particular. Ramazani, for instance, has observed that reading *RLT*

a reader unfamiliar with Persian literature will reach the last page of this book without any inkling that there exist many contemporary works written by Iranian women the reading of which could have been an equally subversive act as reading Nabokov ... Nafisi thus seems to make the reading of Western literature the necessary requisite for redemption and liberation of the mind. ("Persepolis" 279)

Describing her participation in a literary coterie in Tehran, where classical Persian literature was discussed, Nafisi thus concludes her ruminations about Persian literary masterpieces:

We would take turns reading passages aloud, and words literally rose up in the air and descended upon us like a fine mist, touching all five senses. There was such a teasing, playful quality to their words, such joy in the power of language to delight and astonish. I kept wondering: when did we lose that quality, that ability to tease and make light of life through our poetry? At what precise moment was this lost? (172)

As the above excerpt illustrates, the power and joy of reading Persian literature is treated as something confined to the past, an anachronism in contemporary Iranian literary landscape and seems to have vanished all at once at a particular juncture, which as it turns out from the narrative, is the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Besides being a common denominator of neo-Orientalist discourses, some critics have also imputed this dismissive and denigrating attitude to the author's ignorance of Persian literature and her fixation with its Western counterpart (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 93). In keeping with the essentializing and polarizing tendency of neo-Orientalist discourses, *RLT* suppresses the multiplicity, polyphony, and variegated nature of the literary scene in Iran, rendering it, instead, dormant, dogmatic, and insipid. Keshavarz has pointed out that notwithstanding *RLT*'s discussion of a wide range of

classic English literature, it “shows no awareness whatsoever of the lively and controversial literature created in Iran itself in the years prior to, and after the revolution. In fact, it suggests a total absence of interest in literature by local culture” (*Jasmine and Stars* 7).

Not only is the multifarious Iranian literary tapestry totally absent in *RLT*, the absence is imputed to what the author depicts as the innate philistinism of the Iranian culture. Thus, Nafisi asserts that “We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent - namely ideology” (25). Keshavarz, herself a professor of English and Iranian literature in the U.S., has called Nafisi’s accusation “shocking”, adding that “We did more than value the world of literature, we lived in it” (*Jasmine and Stars* 30).<sup>50</sup> She instantiates in meticulous detail the liveliness and variety of the literary exchange in Iran and has thus responded to Nafisi’s cultural commentary:

I had lived, studied, and worked on three continents, and if there was a culture in which people expressed their enthusiasm for literature more publicly than in Iran, I could not think of one. It would be difficult to live in Iran and not see that this enthusiasm was not limited to the educated elite either. How many a baker, shopkeeper, or taxi driver had I heard whispering Omar Khayyam under his breath. Now this book, which meant to celebrate the power of literature, denied and erased this most prevalent cultural behavior in the society I knew so well. (*Jasmine and Stars* 17)

In a similar fashion, Nafisi’s formulations of the novel genre in the Iranian literary landscape are problematic and questionable. I previously discussed that Nafisi imputes what she deems the failure of the novel in Iran to the genre’s “basically democratic structure” (187). In other words, what she sees as the undemocratic sociopolitical condition of the Iranian society has precluded the genre from flourishing in Iran. Dabashi and Keshavarz, among others, have strongly

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<sup>50</sup> In the same context, an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* described Iran’s annual International book fair “the world’s biggest book labyrinth” which “attracts half a million visitors a day ... more than the number of people who visit Frankfurt Book Fair, which claims to be the biggest in the world, over its duration” (Kamali Dehghan).

disputed Nafisi's conclusion apropos the reception of novels in Iran. As Keshavarz argues, Nafisi's idea of the novel is predicated upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of the polyphonic nature of novel as a quintessentially Western genre, "a result of the democratization of social structure" (*Jasmine and Stars* 92), which, ipso facto deems non-Western cultures incapable of making any meaningful contributions to the genre. She further argues that "The New Orientalist narrative continues to perpetuate the outmoded Eurocentric approach to the novel" (*Jasmine and Stars* 92) and, in doing so, *RLT* "uses the same simplistic method of literary analysis for which it criticizes the Muslim activist bad guys: confusing fiction with real life" (*Jasmine and Stars* 92). While Nafisi ridicules, and in fact loathes, Muslim activist students for their alleged lack of sophistication in reducing the literary to the political – as exemplified by some of her students' objections to Gatsby's 'decadence' – she "judges the current state of the Persian novel (which it does not examine) to be poor and considers the condition to be the literary implication of reality in Persian society" (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 93).

Both Dabashi and Keshavarz have enunciated in detail how the post-Revolution Iranian literary and cultural landscape has been as animated, dynamic, and varied as ever before and is all but wanting in modern counterparts of its ancient literary giants. Also, Nafisi's attack on the Iranian cinema and censorship is contradicted by the many global accomplishments of Iranian cinema almost all achieved after the Islamic Revolution.<sup>51</sup>

It goes without saying that cultural analysis and commentary is contingent upon specificity, historicization, and contextualization. One cannot concur more with the truism that censorship is an undesirable phenomenon in all its manners. However, even though none of the Western novels Nafisi discusses in *RLT* were forbidden (at least in their English versions) in Iran in the first place, as Keshavarz has shrewdly observed, "what is surprising is the speed with which the revolution opened its doors on Nabokov again by allowing a government-funded agency to publish, in 1994, a book by *RLT*'s author about the controversial Russian writer"

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<sup>51</sup> To cite a more recent cinematic example, one could refer to the Iranian movie *A Separation* (2011), which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2012, received the Golden Bear for Best Film and the Silver Bears for Best Actress and Best Actor at the 61st Berlin International Film Festival, and also won the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film.



(*Jasmine and Stars* 37).<sup>52</sup> Characteristically, Nafisi remains silent on the far more serious censorship that existed in her romanticized pre-Revolutionary Iran. Azar Mahloujian has explained that the publication or possession of forbidden books under the Shah was “dangerous for all concerned – writers, readers, booksellers and publishers – so those who are not political activists will seldom risk reading them”. She goes on to add that the possession of Maxim Gorki’s *Mother*, for instance, could “lead to a three-year jail sentence” (Mahloujian).

Finally, it should be stressed that to criticize Nafisi for the many learned omissions, literary and otherwise, is not to fall into the trap of what Said has dubbed a “politics/rhetoric of blame”.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, it is to contextualize and shed light on the many significant aspects surrounding the production of the memoir that, being known, can lead to a very different reading of the book. Similarly, as much as reflecting on the shortcomings of the Islamic Republic and appreciating the struggles and aspirations of a nation for more democratic change and reform is not only legitimate but urgently indispensable, colluding with U.S. neoconservative politics is counterproductive and detrimental to the indigenous struggles of Iranians. While the former involves restoration of hope to a nation and a committed appreciation of its democratic aspirations and resistance to authoritarianism, the latter divests it of its hope, dignity, and self-determination (Dabashi “Native Informers”).

As Said has asserted, “We live of course in a world not only of commodities but also of representation, and representations - their production, circulation, history, and interpretation - are the very element of culture” (*Culture and Imperialism* 56). Against this backdrop, it would be apt to return to the link established at the beginning of this chapter between *RLT* and *Not Without My Daughter*, by the following juxtaposition of the two books by Dabashi to help illuminate the connection between the two:

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<sup>52</sup> One of the significant omissions – and one of the greatest ironies, too – in *RLT* is how despite lengthy discussions of *Lolita*, Nafisi does not make as much as a passing reference to its publication history. Grogan has noted how “After being rejected by four American publishers, one of whom said that if he printed the book both he and Nabokov would go to jail, the novel was released in Paris in 1955 by Olympia Press, primarily a publisher of pornography. It would take another three years for *Lolita* to make its debut in the United States” (52).

<sup>53</sup> This is particularly true of such omissions as the Iranian grievances against U.S. intervention in their country, manifest in such events as the Iran-Iraq War imposed on Iran by the unstinting support of the U.S.

So far as its unfailing hatred of everything Iranian – from its literary masterpieces to its ordinary people – is concerned, not since Betty Mahmoody's notorious book *Not Without My Daughter* (1984) has a text exuded so systematic a visceral hatred of everything Iranian. ("Native Informers")

If anything, the unprecedented reception of Nafisi's memoir in the West, and particularly in the United States, by both the reading public and Western reviewers is a testament to the appeal of Orientalism as an ideology, the Western obsession with the Orient, especially its women, and the belief in the universal superiority of Western norms and values. Furthermore, the much-less enthusiastic reception of Nafisi's next memoir, *Things I Have Been Silent About* (2008) – a far more personal and far less 'political' and 'exotic' narrative about her mother's life and Nafisi's troubled relationship with her – is an additional proof of the power that Orientalism in all its shapes, forms, and manners exerts in both the general Western readership's understanding of its Other as well as the reception of the literary and cultural products about them. Finally, it is worth reiterating that *RLT* is a book about Iranian women and reading. It is equally about the liberating power of Western literature for Iranian women. Nafisi's memoir is Western – in language, locus, and its frame of reference – and the numerous rave reviews and ratings promote it as a "literary masterpiece". The question that lingers after reading *RLT* is how liberated would Iranian women feel after reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran*?

## Chapter Four

### Jasmine and Stars: Strains of Dissent and a Fledgling Alternative Discourse

The Persians have been called “the French of Asia”, and their superior intelligence, their esteem for men of learning, their welcome to Western travelers, and their tolerance of Christian sects in their territory ... would seem to derive from the rich culture of this choir of great poets, perpetually reinforced through five hundred years, which again and again has enabled the Persians to refine and civilize their conquerors, and to preserve a national identity. (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Preface* to Francis Gladwin’s translation of Saadi’s *Rose Garden*, 1864)

As exemplified in the two previous chapters, the mainstream discursive practices on Iran – be it in literature, journalism, or cinematic and artistic expressions, and even, sadly, some of academic scholarship – rely predominantly on an Orientalist epistemology. Nevertheless, a body of knowledge and representation has in recent years started to germinate that proffers an alternative discourse characterized by a comparatively less clichéd, less binary, and more nuanced representation of the complexities and the variegated tapestry of the country, its culture, religion, politics, and peoples. This novel body of discursive practices pales in comparison to the dominance and authority of the prevailing Western regimes of knowledge production on Iran and Islam. However, in order not to commit the folly of Orientalist exclusionism, it is indispensable to include works of a resistant strain in any discussion of Orientalism – and especially its more recent offshoots, that is, neo- and auto-Orientalism – and its multifarious cultural products. As Fatemeh Keshavarz has proposed, the recognition of these resistant narratives and “multiplicity of voices will empower us to resist all totalizing and silencing efforts” of Orientalist discourses (*Jasmine and Stars* 16).

It is vital to appreciate the significance of discursive and narrative resistance to Orientalist epistemology and regimes of representation, themselves being direct corollaries of imperial and hegemonic political power structures. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said initiates new discussions that he had left out of his seminal *Orientalism*. These discussions that

inform Said's theorizations of the nexus between culture and imperialism include both a global pattern of Western imperial culture and the response to Western dominance, hegemony, and colonization which, in turn, led to decolonizing movements throughout the colonized world. In conjunction with the armed resistance of the colonized peoples, Said maintains, "went considerable efforts in cultural resistance almost everywhere, the assertions of nationalist identities, and, in the political realm, the creation of associations and parties whose common goal was self-determination and national independence" (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). What I will be calling a "resistant discourse" in this chapter is an example of the cultural resistance to power of hegemonic Orientalist discourses that Said deems closely intertwined with issues of national identity and self-determination.

Investigating the repertoire of the mentioned alternative discourses is indispensable for several reasons. Firstly, it brings to light the numerous discussions, perspectives, and historico-political contexts left out, wittingly or unwittingly, in the dominant and domineering narratives about the Oriental Other, specifically about Iran and Islam. This can be achieved "by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded" (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 66). Secondly, by the same token that any discussion of Western imperialism and colonization is incomplete without discussing the resistances against and oppositions to them, any discussion of (neo-)Orientalist narratives would be similarly incomplete and insufficient without cultural forms that deviate – to varying degrees – from the dominant discursive practices. In fact, Said regards such counter narratives not as separate discursive entities but rather as inextricable from narratives of Western imperialism. In other words, to leave out these narratives would be to acknowledge – in the same exclusionist Orientalist vein best exemplified in the strategy of negation – that they do not actually exist. This acknowledgement, in its own right, helps further the marginalization and often ill-fated receptions of such narratives, *ipso facto* solidifying the almost monopolistic power that the dominant narratives exert on representations of the Oriental Other. Finally, bringing the 'resistant' narratives to the fore of the discussions of (neo-)Orientalism would provide them with a space to be seen,

studied, and analyzed and thus could help in propelling them out of the zone of marginality and obscurity to which they appear to be currently destined.

The significance of the voices that resist or challenge dominant narratives of the Oriental Other should not be underestimated. Narratives play a vital role in the self-determination of colonized and marginalized societies and peoples. Said argues that “Nations themselves are narrations” (*Culture and Imperialism* xii) and proceeds to elaborate on his assertion about the nexus between the notions of narration, resistance, and emancipation:

The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community.<sup>1</sup>(xii)

Said’s point about Orientalist exclusionism and blocking other narratives has been touched upon in previous chapters in discussions of negation, learned elimination, dehistoricization, and decontextualization in the works of both Mahmoodi and Nafisi, wherein the conspicuous absence of historico-political contexts in these accounts were elaborated. What I will be calling the resistant narratives, however, not only do not obliterate and negate these contexts as much as neo-Orientalist narratives do, but rather try to engage with them both as essential parts of the narrative and as a way of contextualizing the events and balancing the discourse and descriptions.

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<sup>1</sup> A prominent example of Said’s argument is the case of the Black Jacobins, who radicalized aspects of the French Revolution – however, even with this example, there are limits to the extent to which such fights are incitements to further fights, or are subject to containment – hence Said’s point about “blocking” narratives.

In this chapter, I will partly explicate how this alternative discourse predominantly operates through the *modus operandi* of what has been termed “*strategic* (auto) Orientalism”, as opposed to its *essentialist* counterpart. Essentialist (auto) Orientalism, as it is evident from its appellation, is the kind of Orientalism – basically the same as classical Orientalism – that is characterized by a binary opposition between the perceived “essences” of the West and its Oriental Other. The concept of strategic (auto-)Orientalism is adopted from Spivak’s theorization of a “strategic” utilization of “essentialism” (183) in one of her significant interviews, *Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution* (1984). Strategic (auto-)Orientalism entails the strategic utilization of the fluid nature of what are perceived as particular essences – expressed in the form of Orientalist tropes such as the veil – which are “necessary to express and intervene in discursive negotiations about representation”, without necessarily consolidating them (Koegeler 19). Homi Bhabha has defined such “essences” as “the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (“The Other Question” 66). Fixity, according to Bhabha, is the major discursive strategy and “the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism” which can be defined as “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated” (“The Other Question” 66).

It goes without saying that such “essences” only exist in the Orientalist frame of reference, and their strategic employment is only to elaborate and contextualize them by way of drawing attention the complexities, nuances, and contexts that characterize them, and to eventually undermine or subvert them. Thus, Spivak cautions that strategic essentialism should not be misconstrued as either “perpetuating ethnicities” or constructing superior interlocutory positions. In other words, she deems indispensable the existence of a “minimalizable essence” in communicating “difference” (30). Hence, strategic (auto)Orientalism can be used as a potentially empowering representational *modus operandi* via which hyphenated minority writers, and especially Muslim/Iranian-American female authors can represent themselves and their native cultures. It is worth mentioning that the “auto-Orientalism” involved in strategic auto-Orientalism is based on the broader definition of the concept – also presented in the

previous chapter – as “self-discourse among orientals”(Carrier 36), which stresses the eye-witness quality and the “native or seminative insider tone” of the narrator (Keshavarz *Jasmine and Stars* 3).

Insofar as auto-Orientalist self-representation is concerned, both strategic and essentialist modes of Orientalism share two major denominators. First, they both rely predominantly on the citationality – that is, citing established Orientalist topoi – of Orientalist tropes. In this light, Koegeler has argued that employing various forms of auto-Orientalism enables minority authors to achieve

access to the U.S. literary market via citation of orientalist tropes and thus [to] actively participate in the majority discourses surrounding Islam, Muslim women and Americanness. Citation of established orientalist tropes provides access to publication by way of its mutual legibility by majority discourses and minority writers. (iii)

While it has to be acknowledged that employing the citational nature of Orientalist discourses can lead to further solidification of existing stereotypes, it can also serve as a space for interlocution, contestation, and subversion of Orientalist binary oppositions. In other words, while the citation of certain Orientalist tropes enables the minority writer to gain access to the American literary market, she can employ that access to proactively and subversively modify these “essences” while keeping them fluid. Thus, a strategically auto-Orientalist formulation can help construct a counter-hegemonic discursive intervention in the monolithic Orientalist images of Iranian/Muslim societies, and particularly their women’s subjectivities, and lay their representations bare “thus reveal[ing] these images to be empty signifiers detached from actual practices” (Koegeler 30). In both modes of Orientalism, according to Koegeler, “access depends on the referent being mutually recognizable” both by a majority Western – and particularly American – readership and the hyphenated American audience such as Muslim Americans, and in the case under study Iranian-Americans (6).

The second common denominator shared by the two manners of auto-Orientalism in the current discussion is the dual situatedness, which is the intermediary, compradorial position

of the author, which serves two totally distinct purposes in each mode of representation. While this dual rootedness imparts authenticity, credibility, and power to the personal voice of the minority author employing essentialist Orientalism (as witnessed in the case of *RLT*), and thus further validates the Orientalist binarism underlying her work, it can open up a discursive space for the in-between subjectivities of minority women who employ it strategically “as cultural mediators that defy East/West binaries and thus destabilize a clear cut notion of a stable U.S. culture based on normativity and escape a neoliberal logic of validating only certain kinds of diversity” (Koegeler iii).

Nevertheless, contrary to essentialist Orientalism, which positions the forged Other as fundamentally inferior to and distinct from the Western – particularly American – culture, strategic Orientalism posits the same culture – be it Muslim, Iranian, or Arab – within and as an inherent part of the melting pot of American cultures. Thus, while strategic utilization of Orientalist references – to varying degrees, indeed – empowers the minority writer to access the American literary market, she can take advantage of her access and double-situatedness to destabilize Orientalist tropes and forge new spaces for minority women’s voices. This new space, and the strategic uses of “essences” can be read in the context of what Homi K. Bhabha has termed Third Space “which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (*The Location of Culture* 37).

It should be added that strategic Orientalism through citationality is only one form of subverting and challenging Orientalist stereotypes in both fictional and non-fictional narratives. Even though fictional narratives are typically perceived as lending themselves more readily to manipulation and utilization of fictional and literary strategies required for a strategic employment of Orientalist representations, one could argue that nonfiction forms borrow as much from other literary traditions as fiction proper. In fact, as pointed out in the two previous chapters, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is particularly problematic with Orientalist texts, as almost all (neo-)Orientalist narratives are characterized by a constant



blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. Thus, in as much as any text is constructed, the ‘fictions’ of Orientalism may just become more ‘naturalized’ in a nonfiction text.

Similarly, fiction authors are often perceived as having more normative control over their representations since the questions of authenticity and truth value are not nearly as determining and challenging in fiction as they are in such non-fiction genres as memoir and autobiography. Nevertheless, one could argue that when it comes to such literary forms as historical fiction, for instance, or fiction that seems to rely on specific cultural contexts, fiction writers can also be challenged for liberties taken.<sup>2</sup>

Be that as it may, one could observe that as far as direct and explicit citations of Orientalist tropes are concerned, they are mostly found in works that are labeled as fiction. Even though autobiographical accounts are as much subject to construction (through the processes of selection and deletion), rhetoric, allusion, and emplotment as a work of fiction is, the readers commonly regard a memoir to be a ‘true’ account based on the ‘first hand’ and ‘eyewitness’ quality of the genre. Therefore, as far as autobiographical narratives are concerned, it is predominantly the same ‘native’ knowledge of the narrator and the power of ‘eyewitness’ observation fortified by the author’s immersion in the Western language and culture that enables her to offer an alternative account to that of their neo-Orientalist counterparts for the general Western audience.<sup>3</sup>

To investigate the representations of Iran in both the public domain and literary discourses is to be struck by the power and prevalence of the hegemonic Orientalist discourse that defines and represents the country, as typified by Mahmoody’s and Nafisi’s works respectively. Narratives of a ‘resistant’ character are so few and far between that they form only a minute portion of the repertoire of literary knowledge production on Iran. The majority

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, one could refer to Salman Rushdie as an example of someone not effectively able to defer criticism of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) despite its “fictional” status.

<sup>3</sup> It has to be stressed that these are only a few of the genre’s features that follow audience expectation, but not the only claims to authority in self-writing. Also, features of ‘native’ knowledge and ‘eyewitness’ observation are not limited to this literary form and may appear in such other forms as the historical novel.

of such 'different' representations belong, perhaps, to the documentaries that do not expressly deal with Iran's political landscape, often produced by Westerners who have visited the country and have found themselves astounded by the disparity between media representations of the country and the reality on the ground. Even so, these documentaries are neither significant in number nor do they go unchallenged by the scores of political and propagandistic documentaries burgeoning most specifically in the context of Iran's so-called "nuclear issue".<sup>4</sup>

In the literary domain, with a few exceptions, it has only been recently that such narratives have started to emerge in the canon of Iranian-American memoirs in earnest. Significantly, and ironically perhaps, some of these narratives are influenced by Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In other words, in the same manner that the success of Nafisi's memoir instigated a new wave of neo-Orientalist Iranian-American memoirs, one could argue that it also influenced, both quite directly and indirectly, the production of new 'resistant' voices among the female Iranian-American exilic writers.

Narratives of discursive resistance against the hegemonic presence of Orientalist representations share a few denominators. Predominantly, such narratives are accounts of in-betweenness, dual marginality, and identity crisis and often recount the author's quest for her true self or native roots. Furthermore, they are not as nearly enthusiastically received either by the Western reading public or the reviewers as their neo-Orientalist counterparts. Ironically though, such narratives provide much richer ethnographic details as well as historical, social, political, and religious backgrounds. S. Asha has lamented that "What is most unfortunate is that such books [neo-Orientalist narratives] get published at the cost of other books, that give a fuller, authentic account of the Middle Eastern woman" (48). This contextualization paves the way for more nuanced discussions of such controversial and complex events as the Iranian Revolution, the Hostage Crisis, the Iraqi-imposed war, the question of women, and the pre-Revolution era that frequently appear in Iranian-American narratives and thus help the Western reader arrive at a more nuanced and more realistic understanding of the country.

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<sup>4</sup> This recent genre of political documentaries is epitomized by *Iranium*, a 2011 film by director Alex Trueman, which in the U.S. neo-conservative vein, portrays Iran as no less than a threat to the entire world (Izadi et al.).

### ***Jasmine and Stars: Cracking the Orientalist Monolith***

The foremost 'resistant' memoir on Iran, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran*<sup>5</sup> (henceforth abbreviated as *J&S*) is penned by Professor Fatemeh Keshavarz.<sup>6</sup> Keshavarz's memoir is particularly significant for several reasons. First and foremost, as the memoir title clearly shows, *J&S* is produced in direct response to Nafisi's *RLT* as the epitome of a whole genre of Muslim women's memoirs, and thus sets out to challenge Nafisi's assertions and to furnish an alternative lens through which the Western reader is invited to (re)view the stereotypical representations of Iran and Islam. In this light, one could argue that Keshavarz's counter-discursive strategies are well-aligned with Helen Tiffin's observation that "counter-discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'" (98). It is for the provision of such counter-discursive insights that David Pitt has recommended *J&S* as "an excellent counterpoint for book-group discussions of Nafisi's book" (53).

Also, *J&S* is perhaps the only other Iranian-American memoir – besides *RLT* – in which the author draws extensively on literature for her discussions and is also quite well-versed in Western literatures. Contrary to Nafisi, though, Keshavarz displays a profound familiarity with the Persian/Iranian literary traditions as well. Nevertheless, as Keshavarz has argued

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<sup>5</sup> There are a number of other memoirs which display both formal and thematic strains of resistant to the neo-Orientalist discourse. Firoozeh Dumas's *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (2003), and *Laughing without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen* (2008) are notable for their investment in the language of humor. Gelareh Asayesh's *Saffron Sky* (1999) and Nasta Ramazani's *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale* (2002), also depart from the prevalent Orientalist depictions of Iran through contextualization of historical events. Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening* (2006) – even though invested in perpetuating some of the clichéd myths regarding the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war – is also noteworthy for its representations of the social and political agency of Iranian women, its identification with the Islamic faith, its contextualization of historical events, and its criticism of American double-standards. Most recently, *The Good Daughter* (2011) by Jasmine Darznik displays an awareness of the representational complexities of three Iranian women's lives and the need for specificity and contextualization.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Keshavarz is currently the director of the Roshan Institute for Persian Studies at University of Maryland.

*RLT* benefits from reading a range of good Western literature to understand the cultural exchange taking place in the early decades of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, it shows no awareness whatsoever of the lively and controversial literature created in Iran itself in the years prior to, and after the revolution. In fact, it suggests a total absence of interest in literature by local culture. (7)

Moreover, like Nafisi's memoir, the content of *J&S* is divided between autobiography and critical analyses of literary works, but here the works are predominantly Persian fiction and poetry. Keshavarz's introduction and analysis of some towering figures of both classical and contemporary Persian literary tradition is one of the major strengths of Keshavarz's narrative, which lend a novelty to her memoir, making it distinct from similar works by Iranian-American women. Along the same lines, Elisheva Machlis contends that

The novelty of *Jasmine and Stars* lies less in its discourse on Orientalism and more in its attempt to forge through its lavish Persian literature a new understanding of Iran for a non-specialist Western readership, in a personal account of Iranian culture. (103)

The choice of both 'memoir' as the genre in which Keshavarz intends to write back to *RLT*, as well as the main themes underlying *J&S* are significant for two interrelated reasons. On the one hand, one of Keshavarz's main reasons for writing *J&S* – as demonstrated in the book title "Reading More Than *Lolita* in Tehran" – is as a counterhegemonic response to *RLT*. Therefore, it is only apt to write back within the boundaries of the same narrative and thematic structure in which *RLT* is constructed; hence, not only the formal choice of 'memoir', but also the interspersed analyses of contemporary Persian literary works in *J&S*. In this light, Amy Motlagh has observed that Keshavarz has "to meet the claims of the memoirists on their own ground, penning a memoir that explicitly engages some of the assertions leveled by *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" ("Towards a Theory" 32).

On the other hand, in choosing to write a 'memoir' addressing issues – such as the question of Iranian women and Islam – that have gained a renewed social and political currency in the aftermath of 9/11, Keshavarz demonstrates an accurate understanding of the

expectations of the American publishing market and by extension her intended Western readership.

Keshavarz herself has introduced her contribution to the representations of Iran and Islam as “a literary and cultural analysis long in the making” (7); yet, in presenting her social and cultural analysis, she “keep[s] [her] personal voice in the foreground. Everything in the book is centered on my own personal stories, even when I reach out to classical Sufi masters to illustrate a point” (7). This description of the narrative strategies of *J&S* corresponds with Keshavarz’s characterization of the dominant features of the formalistic and representational strategies of “New Orientalist” narratives and proves the existence of a structural and thematic pattern in Iranian-American self-writing, which Keshavarz herself has both identified and deployed effectively:

They often have an informal tone and a hybrid nature that make for an accessible read. Most of them blend travel writing, personal memoir, journalistic reporting, and social commentary. They show awareness of the power of personal voice, nostalgia in exilic literature, the assurance that comes with insider knowledge, and the certainty of eyewitness accounts. (7)

In other words, in laying out the denominators of what Keshavarz describes as a “New Orientalist” discourse, Keshavarz displays a considerable measure of self-referentiality to her own narrative, although her memoir stands in stark contrast to such narratives. *Jasmine and Stars* employs a tone that is at times much more informal than many other Iranian-American memoirs, such as when the autobiographical Keshavarz directly addresses her audience: “There are so many other stories I could have told you. But this is how I want you to meet my maternal uncle the painter, in his elegant military uniform, completely unimpressed with corrupt power” (59); or “Let me tell you why I loved to have tea with Rumi so much” (161). Keshavarz also expresses her own hybridity by explicitly defining herself as Iranian-American:

Before everything else, I am an Iranian American woman ... I have lived and worked in the United States since 1987. I visit Iran every year and stay for anywhere from weeks to

months at a time. When I am there, I see relatives, catch up with high school and university friends, buy books, visit universities and other institutions of learning, and connect with Iranian poets and scholars. Iran and America are both my home. Both make me delighted and furious at short and frequent intervals. (8)

Similarly, Keshavarz blends “travel writing, personal memoir, journalistic reporting, and social commentary” if not more, then just as much as most Iranian-American memoirs. She speaks, for instance, of her frequent travels to Iran, as well as other parts of the world, draws heavily on personal reminiscences and the power of nostalgia, and her commentary runs the gamut of issues ranging from representations of Muslims in the West to learned discussions of both classical and contemporary Persian literature. Some of these themes will be elaborated in the ensuing discussions of Keshavarz’s memoir.

Similar to other Iranian-American memoirs, Keshavarz’s narrative also epitomizes an “awareness of the power of personal voice, nostalgia in exilic literature, the assurance that comes with insider knowledge, and the certainty of eyewitness accounts” (7). Written in the autobiographical first person, Keshavarz establishes herself as an Iranian woman – hence, an ‘insider’ – born, raised, and partly educated in Iran: “I grew up in the historic city of Shiraz in southwest Iran, where I went to school and university” (8). Personal narratives and childhood nostalgia, along with her constant trips to Iran and the close relationship she has maintained over the years with different echelons of the Iranian society and its intelligentsia are meant to qualify her as a narrator empowered by the privilege of first-hand observation and insider knowledge.

In fact, Keshavarz’s personal reminiscences and experiences of Iran – that she has romantically dubbed her “jasmine and stars” – are among the most powerful passages of her memoir. Lynne Dahmen has argued that “The strength of Keshavarz’s work lies in her passionate descriptions of her childhood, family members, and various people and poets who have greatly impacted her” (202). Apart from the vicarious joy, sorrow, and nostalgia that such personal anecdotes make accessible for the readers, they go a long way towards humanizing an

entire nation that has been subject to constant demonization in the West, particularly after 9/11. The appeal of Keshavarz's personal narratives lies in the fact that even though she sets out to challenge and subvert dominant stereotypes about Iran and Islam, she does not engage in a romanticized or idealistic portrayal of her native country. Rather, she treats her human subjects in their everyday ordinariness, their frailties and strengths, and thus avoids committing the Orientalist bipolarization of the good and the evil. In this context, one could also observe that in constructing authority, privileging of first person narration, selectivity, and familiarity with the literary material presented Keshavarz is similar to Nafisi's politics of the personal, even though, as it will be shown throughout the chapter, she uses such strategies towards a totally different representational purpose.

Throughout her narrative, Keshavarz engages in an extensive critique of what she describes as the "Islamization of wickedness" (118) and the "Westernization of goodness" (119) in recent narratives on the Middle East, epitomized by *RLT*:

I view this narration of the Middle East as exaggerated and oversimplified at best and fully distorted at worst. In particular, I critique the silencing nature of the narrative reflected in its selective remembering, lack of sensitivity to traditional cultures, and basic contempt for religious practice. My personal stories and analysis are meant to counter the New Orientalist narrative's tendency to amplify fear and mistrust by ignoring similarity and highlighting difference. (110)

In what seems to be an elaborate attempt to subvert the Orientalist connotations of *RLT*'s manipulated cover photo, the image on the cover of *J&S* displays two effervescent and smiling young Iranian women attending a demonstration outside the University of Tehran in 2005 ("An Interview with Fatemeh Keshavarz"). The image portrays the young women placed against a backdrop of jasmine flowers. They are wearing sunglasses, lipsticks, nail polish, and colorful shawls (as their "veils") with most of their hair showing from underneath their scarves. Adding to the significance of the counterhegemonic and multihued portrayal of these two young women are the posters they are holding in their hands with feminist slogans printed on them

that declare “We women demand equal rights with men” and “Injustice to women = Injustice to the entire human society”. The image, therefore, not only stands in marked contrast to that of *RLT* and subverts its monochromatic representation, it also shows an alternative picture of Iranian women, or rather a different and sizeable portion of their considerable population, defined both by their different grooming practice as well as their active social agency in identifying with Iranian feminist causes. The vibrant and cheerful countenances of the two young women also pose a telling counterpoint to the often desperate and distressed images of women in black veils – as if awaiting liberation – that appear on the covers of the majority of Orientalist narratives. Placed against the backdrop of jasmine flowers (that symbolize beauty and fragrance), the image of the smiling and defiant young women foreshadows a narrative about the untold beauties of a culture and its women’s resilience and social agency.

*Jasmine and Stars* opens with a chapter titled after one of the most famous Persian allegories, “the elephant in the room”, quoted from Rumi’s magnum opus, *Masnavi*.<sup>7</sup> Keshavarz’s discussion of Rumi’s allegory at the beginning of her narrative to caution against “the dangers of partial or distorted vision” (1) could not have been more appropriate and serves several simultaneous functions. For one thing, it testifies to the author’s knowledge of canonical Persian literature and especially poetry, subjects in which Keshavarz has established herself as an academic as evidenced by her publications.<sup>8</sup> As another significant peritextual element of the book, it is worth noting that *J&S* is published by the University of North Carolina

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<sup>7</sup> This famous allegory of Rumi centers around the story of a group of people who have never seen an elephant before, trying to explain it after touching different parts of the animal in a dark room. The one who has touched its foot describes it as a thick column; the person who has touched the trunk describes the beast as a drain pipe, and the one who has touched its ear describes the elephant as a large fan. Rumi thus concludes that if they only had a candle, all the people would be looking at the same beast. Keshavarz draws on Rumi’s allegory to demonstrate that “cultural commentary demands specificity and contextualization” and to elucidate how “a lack of specificity turns *RLT* into a dark house where the reader has little choice but to feel his or her way around the elephant that is post-revolutionary Iran” (37).

<sup>8</sup> Unlike Nafisi, Keshavarz’s *J&S* is preceded by her pedigree of publications on Persian literature: *A Descriptive and Analytical Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the Library of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine* (1986); *Reading Mystical Lyric: The Case of Jalal Al-Din Rumi* (1988); *Recite in the Name of the Red Rose: Poetic Sacred Making in Twentieth-century Iran* (2006); *Lyrics of Life: Sa’di on Love, Cosmopolitanism and Care of the Self* (2014). Like *J&S*, all the mentioned works are published by university presses.



Press, which further distinguishes the work from *RLT* (published by Random House) and almost all other Iranian-American memoirs.

Keshavarz's reference to Rumi is also quite significant since it serves to set up and signal the author's subsequent discussions of Persian literature and her subversion of a supremacist reading of certain Western literary works in *RLT*. Keshavarz's attention to Persian literary traditions can be juxtaposed to that of Nafisi. In *RLT*, Nafisi acknowledges Rumi, as well as other Persian literary giants, adding that "There was such a teasing, playful quality to their words, such joy in the power of language to delight and astonish" (172). Nevertheless, while Keshavarz demonstrates a lively culture "that did more than value the world of literature; it "lived it" through the ups and downs of life" (Tourage 102), for Nafisi such Persian literary classics belong to an inaccessibly distant past and seem to have no currency in contemporary times. Thus, Nafisi proceeds to declare extinct a whole tradition of Persian literature and the transcendental and liberating values associated with it:

I kept wondering: when did we lose that quality, that ability to tease and make light of life through our poetry? At what precise moment was this lost? What we had now, this saccharine rhetoric, putrid and deceptive hyperbole, reeked of too much cheap rosewater. (172)

In this light, one could argue that Nafisi's view of the Persian literary tradition is reminiscent of the "fatal Impact" trope used by Westerners to seemingly celebrate the cultures they were destroying, a position that – as elaborated in the discussion of *RLT* – suggests very clear allegiance to Western perspective.

Keshavarz's choice of Rumi seems quite a conscious and calculated one, since Rumi remains the best-selling poet in the U.S. and, in fact, the most widely read poet from this tradition in the world (Ciabattari), and thus quoting him as the opening of the memoir will strike a ready chord with the intended Western audience of the book. Finally, with the reference to Rumi's allegory Keshavarz emphasizes the potentiality of Persian literature conspicuously absent in *RLT* and other Orientalist Iranian-American memoirs and initiates her

discussions of Iran and Islam, long before the chapters that directly engage with the liberating and subversive potentials of Persian literature.

From the very outset, Keshavarz makes it clear that the subject of her memoir is the regime of representation responsible for producing the Other for Western consumption, particularly in the United States. Thus, she declares in her introduction that

Since 9/11, knowing about the Muslim Middle East is not a luxury, it is a matter of life and death. We need to know if “they” and their many constellations of cultures out there are really the media-packaged, neat rows of prayer driven by faith, emotion, and instinct. We hear that some blow themselves up just so someone else might die in the process. It feels so unnatural, so wrong. Didn’t these same people write delightful poetry at one time? Didn’t they carve exquisite calligraphy on their window panes and even doorknobs? Didn’t they welcome an exiled Jewish community fleeing Spain in the late fifteenth century? What happened? Something says we must find a candle, for there has to be more to the elephant. (2)

Keshavarz’s professed intention and elaboration on her subject distinguishes her narrative from its (neo)Orientalist counterparts where the underlying Orientalism – or sometimes the author’s intention – is not often expressly stated and gradually emerges during the course of the narrative.<sup>9</sup> Also, in presenting her own narrative, Keshavarz is well aware of the challenges that lie in her mission:

The prevailing perceptions make it very hard for me to give you my gifts [of jasmine and stars]. It is as if a voice in the background, a master narrative has told us how to imagine each other. The narrative has seeped into the fabric of our daily thought and the simplest of our interactions. To empower both of us to break out of that narrative is my challenge. (16)

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<sup>9</sup> This, in fact, is often one of the features of Orientalist texts, where the assumption is that the texts are only “natural” or “commonsensical”, so there is no need to describe them as such, whereas in recent times, an anti-Orientalist text has more sense of its value as a counter.

Quite cognizant of such obstacles, she tries to avoid Orientalist dichotomies and monochromatic portrayals that characterize (neo)Orientalist narratives. In doing so, she evinces a profound consciousness of the Orientalist traps of simplification and negation that might beset her own account. Hence, besides presenting her titular “jasmynes” and “stars” – which stand for what comprises the rich diversity of Iranian society and culture – she also presents her readers with the occasional “grasshoppers” that invaded the sky of her childhood, which stand for the less flattering aspects of the same society and culture she writes about (15).

Well aware of the power attached to personal voice as well as her association with the West, Keshavarz uses her dual-situatedness effectively to drive her messages home and to cover as much of the profound complexity and diversity of her subjects as possible. In other words, Keshavarz’s representational strategy draws more on her positionality than direct citation of Orientalist tropes, and, contrary to Nafisi, when she does cite the established tropes directly it is not to strike a familiar chord with her Western readers and to repeat what they have come to expect from accounts of the Middle East; rather, it is to challenge and refute them. Contrary to Nafisi, Keshavarz attempts to interrupt the romantic image of the oppressed female in seclusion by showing that some women might in fact choose to wear the veil. She argues, for instance, that “these women seem to have a stronger, more articulate voice than quite a few of their unveiled counterparts elsewhere in the world” (50). Also, drawing on the power of self-referentiality and first-hand experience she informs her readers that

When I go to Iran for a visit, I wear the head scarf that is now mandated by the constitution. I do not wear the scarf while outside Iran, and in principle, I like people to be able to choose what they wear. (8)

Since Keshavarz has already set herself up as a highly educated academic and a feminist living in the West, her practice of wearing the veil is unlikely to be construed as a sign of oppression and immobility. In fact, if anything, it undermines Nafisi’s reiteration of the Orientalist claim of the irreconcilability of the Islamic faith with feminist principles.

Keshavarz's introduction and positioning of herself is quite significant both in the appreciation of her work as well as the manner in which she aspires to present her alternative account of Iranian culture and literature. "Before everything else", she thus commences to introduce herself, "I am an Iranian American woman" (8). This explicit reference to her hyphenated identity conveys her sense of belonging to and familiarity with both sides of the Orientalist binary of the West and East and thus creates a network of significations and associations with both locales for her intended American audience.

Keshavarz's unique double-situatedness is also manifest in the way she posits herself as a professor of "Persian/comparative literature and Islamic cultures", subjects that she teaches and researches at University of Maryland, which serve to make her qualified as a commentator and analyst on both the country of her origin and Islam (7). In her own words, "In *Jasmine and Stars*, I carefully and painstakingly weave a multihued tapestry of human voice and experience. I turn my narrating voice into a vehicle for the rainbow of the faces and words that filled my childhood and youth in Iran"(5). In other words, unlike Nafisi who used her dual situatedness to reinforce Orientalist stereotypes about Iran and Islam, Keshavarz – quite consciously, indeed – uses the same position strategically to subvert the same stereotypes and offer an alternative way of seeing the Iranian Other. Despite the ostensible similarity between Nafisi and Keshavarz in terms of their dual positionality and the fact that they are both Westernized academic figures – indeed to very different degrees – Keshavarz's position allows her to import Islam and Persian culture and literature into the West, whereas Nafisi seems to be framing Islam and Persian culture by a misplaced juxtaposition of the West as the norm in Tehran.

After referring to her birthplace in Iran and her British doctorate in Near Eastern Studies from London University, Keshavarz thus continues her introduction of herself, "I am a Muslim, a feminist, a literary scholar, and a poet, though not always in that order" (8). The fact that she clearly posits herself as a Muslim and a feminist bears particular significance in understanding her narrative. On the one hand, she is positing herself in stark contrast to Nafisi and her version of Western feminism which deems being a Muslim and a feminist incompatible, or as she has called it in *RLT* "the myth of Islamic feminism – a contradictory notion, attempting to reconcile

the concept of women's rights with the tenets of Islam" (262). In this light, it is quite significant that Keshavarz not only articulates her religious identification, but the fact that she identifies as a "Muslim" living in the West is noteworthy. In doing so, however, while she is subjecting herself to the Orientalist tropes about Muslim women,<sup>10</sup> she uses her association with the religion strategically in imparting authenticity and credibility to her authorial voice, while her Western situatedness, and especially education and academic position, also facilitate this reception for her intended American readership. Therefore, by identifying as a Muslim and a feminist, Keshavarz is both questioning Nafisi's Western feminism (which denies the recognition of Islamic feminism) while simultaneously casting herself as a Muslim woman committed to the principles of gender equality and social activism.

Keshavarz uses her Iranian rootedness as well as her Western education to subvert some of the most (re)current myths surrounding Iran and Islam, also reiterated blindly in *RLT*. One such myth is regarding the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which figures throughout the entire narrative in *RLT*. While *RLT*'s reductionist and simplistic treatment of the Revolution reduces the manifold sociopolitical causes of the Revolution to Islamic "fanaticism" and "fundamentalism", the occasional analysis that *J&S* offers on the Revolution is vivid and takes note of historical, political, and social causes underlying the Revolution. Keshavarz begins her take on the Revolution with an apt general observation that

In general, revolutions do not present their perspectives politely and peacefully. They throw them at you. Where peaceful means have not failed, a revolution does not take place. In Iran of the 1970s, peaceful means had failed. A look at the writings of major Iranian writers of the 1960s, not all particularly sympathetic to Islam, shows that they predicted the explosion as early as those years. (10)

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<sup>10</sup> Later in the chapter I will demonstrate through Keshavarz's personal narratives how this identification has at times been challenging for the Muslim Keshavarz in the West.

Rebutting the dominant view of the Revolution as simply a result of “absolutist Islam” or a dislike for “freedom and modernization” (19), Keshavarz points to centuries of “unresolved issues” and “local problems” and asserts that

the part that powerful nations of the world have played in sustaining — and at times exploiting — the mess is by no means negligible. These range from the outright colonization of territories and reckless pursuit of short-term economic goals to cultural illiteracy and disrespect. (10)

The latter, that is the crucial role of foreign interventionism — especially that of the United States — in pre-revolutionary Iran is a fact neglected or denied by almost all Orientalist accounts of contemporary Iran. Keshavarz also points out to “the corruption of the pre-revolutionary system and the absence of civil liberties” as main reasons behind the sweeping uprisings of the late 1970s in Iran, which eventually led to the 1979 Revolution (21). This latter cause is quite significant since it poses a sharp contrast to the often highly romanticized pre-Revolutionary Iran as a benign and democratic golden age.

The same argument holds true for Keshavarz’s references to the war imposed on Iran by Saddam Hussein. Nafisi makes quite a few references to Iraq’s bombardment of Iranian cities. Nevertheless, she makes no mention of who actually the perpetrator of the war was and if there is any condemnation of the war at all, it is leveled against the Iranian government (209). Furthermore, the war is principally portrayed as driven by religious fanaticism and the young Iranian volunteers going to the war as “caught up in the government propaganda that offered them a heroic and adventurous life at the front and encouraged them to join the militia, even against their parents’ wishes” (108).

Contrary to “fanatic” and “brainwashed” Iranian volunteers, Nafisi describes — with complete approval — Henry James who was “so actively involved in the war effort” (214) and refers to his two brothers as having “fought with courage and honor” in the war (213). Keshavarz, on the other hand, makes it very clear that “After all, Iranians were not the aggressors, they were the ones attacked” (132), a fact that is never mentioned in *RLT* and many

other kindred memoirs. Keshavarz further contextualizes the war in her discussion of the factual errors in *RLT*:

The records of that terrible war are not classified information. Saddam Hussein took a few cities, used his weapons against Iraqi Kurds and Iranians, fired his missiles as far as they could reach into Iran, lost control over the parts of the country that he had occupied, and finally retreated back into Iraqi territory. (138)

By providing the irrefutable facts about the war, Keshavarz puts into perspective the information that both she and Nafisi provide in their respective accounts about the war.

Like similar occasions in *J&S*, Keshavarz seizes this opportunity to juxtapose the Iran-Iraq War with its American counterparts. Firstly, she draws attention to Nafisi's contradictory attitude towards the wars in which Henry James and Iranian volunteers were involved; an attitude that, more than anything else, proves Nafisi's strong allegiance with the West as the 'superior' end of the Orientalist dichotomy and her "eternal contempt" for those who fought in a war that left millions of Iranians dead or incapacitated. Second, she discusses the current U.S. occupation of Iraq and hints at the full American support for Saddam Hussein:

As much as many of us loathe war—and as much as we wished at the time that the Iran-Iraq war would end quickly—it is distressing to see the struggle so badly misrepresented. The official line of argument out of Iran at the time, not mentioned in *RLT*, was that it was not enough to recapture the city of Khorramshahr from the Iraqis. The aggressor must be made to pay for his action or he will resume his attacks the instant he has regrouped. Saddam was a criminal who used chemical weapons against innocent people, and he must not be allowed to get away with his invasion. Does this line of argument ring a bell with regard to the current American war? Or has Saddam Hussein changed nature as a result of walking out of American grace and friendship? (132-33)

She further criticizes the American war against Iraq in which the U.S. “dragg[ed] the largest army of the world halfway across the globe to fight imaginary weapons of mass destruction” (113). To further undermine Nafisi’s apathy towards and disregard for those involved in the war – which she portrays in *RLT* not as her own peculiarity but as an extension of the public disillusionment with the war – Keshavarz turns to personal reminiscence and testimony to humanize those disparaged by Nafisi:

I will never forget one morning in the summer of 1987 when I was traveling on a bus in north Tehran to visit a friend. I overheard two young men who had apparently been to the war front talking ... One of the voices said: “Fighting at night was the worst. I just did not want to be hit in the dark, you see. You wouldn’t even know exactly which part of you was hit for a while.” The other responded, “I know, but it was more frightening when those things they fired above our heads lighted up the sky. You could suddenly see everything.” I did not look at them, not even when I got off. I would not have known what to do if one had had an arm or a leg missing. I can tell you for sure that neither of them had enjoyed the war, or had looked for heroism, and yet neither had run away—which is why that country is still intact. (134)

She proceeds to further dispute Nafisi’s claim about the war’s unpopularity among Iranians by testifying to the high esteem in which the majority of Iranians hold the war veterans who “literally stopped Saddam Hussein from landing one morning at the Tehran airport” (134). Once again, highlighting the historical Western antagonism towards Iran, she asks, rhetorically, “Had he [Saddam] done so, would the armies of the democratic and peace-loving parts of the world have come to the rescue of the Iranians?” (134). Keshavarz’s rhetorical question further emphasizes “the double standards that many of us in the democratic world live with comfortably” (135).

There are other occasions in which Keshavarz directly challenges descriptions or claims made in *RLT* that she deems either highly exaggerated or driven by a ‘superior’ Western frame of reference. In one noteworthy instance, she compares a concert in Tehran – that Nafisi turns



into an object of ridicule and leaves early lest she gets “trampled by the mob” (301) – with a Speaker Series event held in Washington University – where Keshavarz taught at the time – in which she is assigned to introduce the speaker. The speaker, indeed, is no one else than Nafisi herself and the subject of her talk is *RLT*. Juxtaposing the two situations, Keshavarz observes that if the language of *RLT* in describing Iranian audiences attending a concert were to be adopted, “one could say people ‘were stuffed into the hall’” (20). She also refers to Nafisi’s description of the concert attendants as the “mob” and adds that

But this eager American audience would not be the “mob.” *RLT* reserved such pejorative terms as the “mob” and “mediocre” for performances in Iran and even suggested that the word concert be placed in quotation marks so that “such cultural affairs” would not be mistaken for “the real thing” (*RLT*, 299). (20)

Keshavarz’s descriptive strategy is at once subversive and effective. While analyzing Nafisi’s representational discourse for its “pejorative” use of the language, she juxtaposes the two situations, implying that the same language could potentially be used to describe the event in which Nafisi herself was the guest speaker. However, by hinting at, but refraining from employing the Orientalist language of Nafisi’s description, she is both contextualizing the event in Washington University by recognizing its complexity while criticizing Nafisi’s denigration and ridicule of the Iranian concert. Also, by suspending the use of “pejoratives” herself, she demonstrates restraint and another level of metafictional self-referential awareness above Nafisi’s.

In the same analytical vein, Keshavarz does her best to explain such complex and sensitive issues as the question of women in Iran. The fact that she has earlier posited herself as a feminist and a Muslim is quite significant in her response to the representations of Iranian/Muslim women in Orientalist narratives. Once again, by drawing on some restrictions that some women face – indeed to extremely different degrees – in different Muslim countries, she is strategically utilizing established Orientalist tropes only to subvert the mainstream perceptions of Iranian women in the West:

It is true that a traditionalist wave in Iran has promoted (and continues to promote) the cult of domesticity and motherhood in the aftermath of the revolution. Legal reform in areas related to gender is needed, as is also the case regarding the rights of religious minorities and election laws. But the traditional articulations of women's role are not unanimously endorsed, not even among Islamist movements. Secondly, this perception does not correspond to the reality of women's public participation in postrevolutionary Iran. Women are everywhere, including in the legislative body. Iranian men and women have engaged in reform-oriented activism since the revolution. Shirin Ebadi, the recipient of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, is one such activist. (115)

As a professor of comparative literature, Keshavarz does find something to praise in *RLT*: "its attention to the rich tapestry of world literature" and its "attempt to understand the human experience that transcends religious, social, and cultural boundaries" (22). Keshavarz's recognition of *RLT*'s merit allows her to avoid black-and-white Orientalist binarism. However, even though Keshavarz's acknowledgement of *RLT*'s attention to world literature and the transcendental human experience reflected in literature is significant in its own right, her analyses and discussions of both classical and contemporary Persian literature serve to distinguish her narrative from its Orientalist predecessors and contemporaries.

### **The Eternal Forough: The Rebellious Bard**

Keshavarz's engagement with modern Persian literature is quite noteworthy since it refutes the Orientalist assertion (reiterated by Nafisi in *RLT*) that if there is any "great" Persian literature, it belongs to a long bygone past. It also challenges Nafisi's exclusionist approach that completely disregards Iranian women writers and thus silences both their literary and social contributions and aspirations. Thus, in the second chapter of *J&S*, "The Eternal Forough: The Voice of Our Earthly Rebellion", in a counterhegemonic attempt to both subvert the view of Iranian women as docile and oppressed and to offer an example of modern Persian poetry and fiction and their 'liberating' potentialities, Keshavarz turns to Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), one of the most renowned and arguably one of the most influential modern Iranian female poets. Keshavarz

describes Farrokhzad as “bold, imaginative, curious, full of the urge to live, and certainly not afraid of death” in real life as in her poetry (33). According to Keshavarz, Farrokhzad had “revitalized Persian poetry by opening up its thematic horizons” attending both to such simple subjects “as simple as smoking a cigarette and walking home with a basket of fruit, or as complicated as the horrors of intellectual inertia and the intricacies of womanhood” (34). Keshavarz’s choice of Farrokhzad is also significant from another respect. As Fotouhi has argued, Farrokhzad is often credited as being the first Iranian woman to “write about her very personal life openly while she was still alive”, as reflected in her “autobiographical poems that reflected her unconventional life (103).

Keshavarz’s introduction of Farrokhzad as a source of empowerment through her literature and personal life counterpoints neo-Orientalist representations of Iran both as devoid of such empowering and inspiring figures and its population as simply submissive and oppressed. Interwoven with Keshavarz’s narrative of the life and poetry of Farrokhzad and her own reminiscences about her are counterhegemonic accounts of the question of women in Iran. In these accounts Keshavarz attempts to provide factual and statistical evidence about the active agency of Iranian women in shaping their destiny, thus counterpoising their Orientalist image as oppressed victims of ‘Islamic’ male patriarchy:

Iranian women make up 65 to 70 percent of university students, work in all public offices, and play a vital role in the artistic and intellectual life of the country. It would take an entire book to name and briefly describe the women who have made their mark on Persian poetry and fiction, painting, cinema, photography, hiking, biking, car racing, horse riding, music, scholarship, and more. Yes, women would like to reform electoral law and various other legal codes in Iran to get better representation, and, yes, they are still involved in various struggles to improve their lot. (52)

By referring to women’s “struggles” towards social reformation of issues relating to women, Keshavarz is again highlighting the active presence of Iranian women in the sociopolitical life of their society, while also acknowledging the need for reform and improvement. The latter also

helps offer a more tempered account of the question of women in Iran by acknowledging the challenges they face.

By focusing on the life, character, and poetry of Farrokhzad, Keshavarz is challenging the neo-Orientalist narratives that negate the fact that “a voice as feminine, strong, and articulate as that of Farrokhzad ever existed in Iran” (36). She refers to Farrokhzad’s “passionate love affair with Ibrahim Gulestan, a man to whom she was not married” (34) and discusses how “Farrokhzad celebrated the fullness of her personhood, sexuality included” (34) not only to offer a fuller picture of Farrokhzad, but also to challenge the dominant perception of Oriental/Muslim women as docile sex objects, and to indicate that they can choose to be as ‘deviant’ as their Western counterparts.

In the figure of Farrokhzad, Keshavarz sees an iconoclast who not only breaks out of the societal and conventional bounds, but more daringly, someone who challenges and defies authority and who “refused to swallow the national rhetoric of self-worship” (40). When in the last few decades prior to the Revolution the monarchy decided to revive the “glory” of the ancient Persian Empire, Farrokhzad castigated the pompous and extravagant design via her sarcastic poetry. In her “The Bejeweled Land”, she thus wrote

O, how comfortable I am  
 In the loving arms of the motherland!  
 The pacifier of the glorious historical past  
 The lullaby of civilization and culture  
 And the rattling noise of the ratchet of law  
 O, how comfortable I am! (40)

In quoting Farrokhzad, Keshavarz is tapping into the repertoire of modern Persian literature – and especially poetry – that defied and challenged both the conventional societal norms as well

as authority much more explicitly and daringly than the Western examples offered by Nafisi. So far as Farrokhzad's bold challenging of authority is concerned, it is worth mentioning that contemporaneous with her times, the Shah's intelligence agency, SAVAK, were implicated in the death of a number of prominent Iranian intellectuals and artists, which at the time aroused suspicions that Forough's death might also have been a planned murder.

Keshavarz's celebration of Forough for her novelty of subject and diction, as well as her defiant iconoclasm is warranted. Her reference to Farrokhzad's rebellion in her poetry against the monarchy serves to undermine both the "golden" image of the pre-Revolutionary Iran and diasporic Iranians' obsession with their "glorious" past often perpetuated by the neo-Orientalist narratives as well as Oriental women's submissiveness to patriarchal authority (including monarchy).

As long as Forough's social iconoclasm is concerned, she is often considered as the first modern Iranian female poet who has celebrated human corporeality via writing about sexuality, passion, lovemaking, and nudity:

I sinned a sin full of pleasure,  
 In an embrace which was warm and fiery.  
 I sinned surrounded by arms  
 that were hot and avenging and iron.  
  
 In that dark and silent seclusion  
 I looked into his secret-full eyes.  
 my heart impatiently shook in my breast  
 In response to the request of his needful eyes.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This excerpt from one of Farrokhzad's most famous poems, *The Sin*, published in her collection "The Wall" is taken from <http://www.foroughfarrokhzad.org/collectedworks/collectedworks1.htm>

That Farrokhzad is still hugely popular in Iran is indubitable. So is also the fact that she has been one of the most outspoken iconoclasts in contemporary Persian poetry and has had an enormous influence on later generations of female poets in Iran. What, however, seems to be absent in Keshavarz's introduction of Farrokhzad and her appraisal of her poetry is the fact that Farrokhzad owes much of her popularity to the unprecedented daring physicality of her diction as well as her tragic death at a young age, rather than necessarily the quality of her poetry. Also, it is worth mentioning that as much as Forough's insistence on the corporeal popularized her, it contributed to her ostracism as well. In this light, one could argue that – Farrokhzad's novelty, daring, and iconoclasm notwithstanding – she is hardly representative of the sensibilities of Iranian womanhood. In fact, while her audaciousness in divesting herself from accepted literary and social conventions and her treatment of 'taboo' subjects appealed to a certain class of readers, they, along with her affair, appalled the more traditionalist, conservative, and religious portions of the society, explaining – to some measure – her quick temperament (Parsi). In this light, Simin Behbahani, another prominent contemporary Iranian female poet, recalls in an interview how Farrokhzad offended the sensibilities of some "people [who] did not want their daughters to read Forough's poetry" (Parsi). It is far from an exaggeration to claim that the same sentiments can be found among certain classes of the current Iranian society and that is one of the reasons Farrokhzad's life and poetry remain both popular and intensely controversial in Iran to date.

### **My Uncle the Painter: Reinscribing Iranian Masculinity**

From her elaborations on female defiance and iconoclasm reflected in a rich and lively contemporary literary tradition in the poetry of Farrokhzad, Keshavarz proceeds to offer a counterhegemonic example of Iranian masculinity. In her explication of *RLT*, Keshavarz analyzes a subcategory of characters she aptly dubs "The Faceless":

The Faceless comprise a subcategory of the ugly Muslim men. In a sense, they are the most unfairly treated because they do not have a voice. We do not know their names, nor do we hear them quoted, even indirectly. They are male and are somehow related

to one of the girls we have met in the group. We know that these men are cruel and heartless to their female relatives, which has something to do with their religious convictions. (117)

It is because of the descriptions of characters like *The Faceless* that in the third chapter of *J&S*, titled "My Uncle the Painter", to furnish her "brief counter-Orientalist narration of decent Iranian manhood" (65), Keshavarz introduces her maternal uncle, a former army officer whom she describes as incorruptible, delicate, artistic, suave, and intellectually sensitive. Keshavarz's third chapter is packed with narratives of her uncle's humility and humanity, as well as his artistic passion reflected in his virtuoso watercolor painting. She describes her uncle in all his human ordinariness which manifests itself in Keshavarz's reminiscences, such as the times when her uncle "teased us by putting us on his shoulders and simply walking around" (61). Once again, Keshavarz's intention in telling the story of her uncle is to subvert the neo-Orientalist depictions of Iranian/Muslim men as male chauvinists, oppressors, and molesters and to paint a picture that portrays them in their most ordinary circumstances and as normal human beings capable of all the emotions and sensibilities attributed to their Western counterparts. Hence, Keshavarz remarks,

In the New Orientalist narration of the Middle East, men like my uncle are almost entirely absent ... [the New Orientalist narrative] presents fathers, brothers, and uncles primarily as a menacing group of people. No doubt Iran has its fair share of cruel, unimaginative, sick, or fanatical people. If that were not the case, it would be an unreal country, an invented place, a fantasy. But when you read about the grasshoppers that darken the sky, you should be given a chance to imagine the stars as well. My uncle is a man from that culture, and a permanent star in my sky. (61)

In the New Orientalist accounts of Muslim men, they are most often denied any detailed physical/behavioral description, except that they are unattractive, cruel, oppressive, and male chauvinist and they remain "a vague, brute force" throughout (63). Keshavarz, however, goes against the grain of this Orientalist tradition by providing anecdotes about her uncle's physical

description coupled with his sensitivity, humor, humanity, artistry, and affection for his fellow human beings.

Keshavarz's descriptions of her uncle defy those of the New Orientalist narratives in almost every sense. However, she attaches a particular significance to what she thinks may come as a shock to her Western readers, that is her uncle's devout religiousness (63). Since "New Orientalist" narratives trace almost all the evils and vices imputed to Muslim men mainly to their religion, Keshavarz takes great pains to illuminate her uncle's religious faith and the role it played in shaping and influencing almost all aspects of his life:

I can easily describe my often-smiling uncle, and many other fantastic people I know from my life in Iran, as religious. My uncle will tell you himself that his greatest, most fundamental, and most enduring gift is not his talent for painting. It is his love for God. This is a version of love that includes all life. And yes, it is rooted unambiguously in religion. (63)

While Keshavarz describes her uncle as very much a practicing Muslim who "would not miss a single daily prayer at the age of eighty five" (63), she makes it clear that her uncle's religiousness transcends the boundaries of strict ritual observance and is, in fact, rooted in his love for God and by extension His creatures. For instance, Keshavarz demonstrates that his uncle's vision and perception of the religion of Islam was all-embracing enough to hold "Laurel and Hardy, who are neither Muslim nor Iranian" in high esteem and deem them as being "bound to be good people" since "Being able to make others laugh is a gift from God" (66-7).

Keshavarz elaborates that in his "openness, his ability to empathize with those whose beliefs and practices differ from his own", his uncle was "standing on the shoulder of giants" such as Attar of Nishapur<sup>12</sup> and Rumi (67). She recounts how at the time when the Crusaders were "burning young boys at the stake", Attar preached tolerance and an all-encompassing love for all humanity. Through presenting Attar as a symbol of tolerance and unconditional love for

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<sup>12</sup> The poet, pharmacist/physician, and hagiographer who lived in Iran during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and is best known for his *The Conference of the Birds* (1177),



all human beings, Keshavarz elucidates the provenance of her uncle's all-embracing religious philosophy, while simultaneously challenging the dominant Western perception of Islam as a religion driven by intolerance, fanaticism, and violence. Also, in citing the horrors of the Crusades – while stressing that “Christ had never preached war in his life” (67) – she is reminding her Western readers that no religion should be judged by the actions of its adherents, and therefore further questions the rampant Islamophobia in the West in the aftermath of 9/11.

In order to contextualize her uncle's emphasis on staying “connected” to God rather than overplaying ritual practice and strict religious propriety, Keshavarz turns to one of the most famous anecdotes from Rumi's *Masnavi*, “Moses and the Shepherd”.<sup>13</sup> In this narrative, Moses, overhearing the prayer of the Shepherd, reproves him for his inappropriate way of conversing with the Lord, treating Him “as if the Almighty were another shepherd visiting his house” (68). The Almighty, however, seems to disagree with Moses, thus admonishing him for being too obsessed with the manner of relating to God, reminding his Prophet that “You have come in order to connect”. Besides illuminating the religious tradition – reflected in classical Persian literature – that has nurtured her uncle's all-inclusive religiousness, through the citation of this well-known anecdote Keshavarz seeks to undermine the portrayal of Islam as an exclusionist, intolerant religion. Furthermore, she is also implicitly criticizing the Western double-standard of the pride of place attributed to Rumi as the bestselling poet in the United States, while treating him as irrelevant to the Islamic faith and the tolerance and inclusivity that it preaches.

With a narrative embedded with stories of religious tolerance and openness, Keshavarz characteristically proceeds, unlike Nafisi, to balance her portrayals of giant Muslim classical figures:

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<sup>13</sup> A translation of the poem (by Shahriar Shahriari) can be accessed at:  
[http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/jrumi/masnavi/moses\\_shepherd.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/literature/jrumi/masnavi/moses_shepherd.php)

Obviously not all Iranians or Muslims share the openness and clarity of vision that Attar and Rumi display. Cultures do not produce giants only. But it is true that many like Attar and Rumi existed, and continue to exist, in the religious culture that these two thinkers represent. This is why the vision of these masters has been cherished and carried forth to our times. How else would my uncle learn to stand on their shoulders and allow his God to grow bigger than his personal closet? (69)

It is such tempering practices that distinguishes Keshavarz's memoir from that of Nafisi. In the quote above, not only Keshavarz balances her descriptions of Muslim saints by acknowledging the existence of the inverse, but in so doing, she also acknowledges that such figures "continue to exist" and their legacy has shaped and influenced the lives of many like her uncle. Furthermore, she uses the occasion strategically to embark on her criticism both of the Western "habit" of "not seeing giants like him [Attar] but focus[ing] instead on runts" (69), and the larger problem of understanding knowledge "almost exclusively in terms of scientific discoveries", which has led to the normalization of ignorance regarding the significance of the issues to which she attempts to draw her readers' attention.

Keshavarz's descriptions of her uncle, therefore, stand in stark contrast to the hypocritical, oppressive, and sexually abusive Muslim men that dominate such "New Orientalist" narratives as *RLT*. In stressing the religious character of her uncle, Keshavarz is challenging the "New Orientalist" tendency to accredit personal vices and wrongdoings to the single cause of one's religion. Furthermore, she not only refutes religious sentiments as the root cause of "evil" behavior among Muslim men in "New Orientalist" narratives, but also argues that much in her uncle's amiable character owes to his religious beliefs:

My uncle is very much a Muslim. He believes in the human ability to make direct contact with God and in looking for the inner meanings of things rather than obsessing with their thin surface. Acts of worship are therefore a means for getting somewhere. They are not ends in themselves. (63)

Keshavarz's subversion of the "Islamization of wickedness" begins not with the introduction of her uncle, but in fact much earlier on in her narrative. Explaining the "jasmine" in the title of her memoir in her first chapter, Keshavarz associates the flower not only with the Muslim faith and prayers but also with a broader human affection, beauty, and intimacy with which she was cherished as a young girl in her hometown of Shiraz. She thus reminisces how her grandmother

would not go back to bed after the dawn prayer. She would walk around the yard, quietly water the plants, and pick little, white jasmine blossoms from the tree ... My grandmother somehow associated these flowers with prayer and collected fresh jasmine to keep inside her prayer rug until the next morning. But she always collected a few extra flowers for us children and left them on our respective pillows right under our sleepy noses. I would wake up first to their scent, then to their white smiles, and finally to the softness of their petals. They were not just jasmines. They were inseparable from grandma and her prayer rug. (15)

As far as depictions of Iranian manhood are concerned, DePaul contends that Keshavarz's descriptions of her uncle, and later her father, do not displace those of Nafisi's "villainous" characters and argues that "Nafisi's dislikable Islamist characters are misunderstood as depictions of Iranian manhood, since her true target is totalitarian ideological extremists of any political party" ("Reviews" 185). Be that as it may, as was previously shown in the discussion of *RLT*, Nafisi's "villainous" depictions of Iranian men are extended to almost all the male characters in her memoir, whether "Islamist" or otherwise, except those who are in various measures associated with the West – ranging from her father to her "magician" – and for whom Nafisi reserves a special liking. What is more, through the medium of her personal and often quite ordinary narratives, Keshavarz illustrates that her uncle's amiable character was not an exception, "but rather the continuation of a norm extending far back into Iran's literary and cultural history", as demonstrated in the examples of Attar and Rumi above. (Tourage 103).

## Women Without Men: The Latter-Day Persian Scheherazade

In her review of *Jasmine and Stars*, Amy DePaul has argued that Keshavarz's narrative is at its best when it explicates

the verse and fiction, respectively, of poet Forough Farrokhzad and novelist Shahrnush Parsipur. The portrait that emerges of these two exciting writers and their work goes a long way toward proving Keshavarz's contention that more than *Lolita* is being read in Tehran, if there was ever any doubt. ("Reviews" 185)

In the fourth chapter of *J&S*, Keshavarz turns to literary analysis of what she considers a "phenomenon in contemporary Persian fiction", namely *Women Without Men* (1989), a novella by Shahrnush Parsipur, another influential contemporary Iranian female author. Keshavarz's taxonomic approach in naming the chapter – and the chapter on Farrokhzad, too – is reminiscent of Nafisi's practice in naming the chapters of *RLT* after Western classics or their authors, a fact that makes Keshavarz's narrative partly "a memoir in books", as the subtitle of *RLT* reads. Furthermore, Keshavarz begins her subversion of both *RLT*'s myopic representations and the larger Orientalist assumptions from the titles of her chapters. In the previous chapter, the phrase "The Voice of our Earthly Rebellion" that follows the name of the poet foreshadows not only the "rebellious" nature of the poet but the possessive pronoun "our" shows that her rebelliousness was, and continues to be, shared by a larger population of Iranian women. Similarly, the phrase "Fireworks of the Imagination" that comes after the title of the novel in question – *Women Without Men* – presages Parsipur's novel as one characterized by literary novelty and an imaginative turn of mind. The reading of the novel corroborates the phrase in the title, as the power of imagination in Iranian women's personal lives (as well as in their literature) appears as a leitmotif throughout the narrative.

Keshavarz's meticulous analysis of *Women Without Men*, serves a threefold purpose. On the one hand, by devoting an entire chapter to the analysis of the work of a contemporary Iranian women writer, Keshavarz is unsettling the Orientalist assumption, also asserted in *RLT*,

of the absence of any significant contemporary literary tradition in Iran. In this light, Keshavarz's introduction of the author is noteworthy:

Parsipur is a star brightening the way for men and women privileged to read her writings in Persian or in any language into which they have been translated. She is one of the Iranian women writers who wrote before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and lived in Iran until the 1990s. The silence in the New Orientalist narrative about Parsipur and others like her needs to be remedied. Hence my close reading of *Women without Men*, a simple affirmation of her towering presence in contemporary Iranian literature. (*Jasmine and Stars* 106)

Also, by analyzing *Women Without Men*, not only a novel but one about Iranian women's resilience and self-empowerment, Keshavarz is refuting Nafisi's theory of the novel as an essentially Western genre which has failed to flourish in the Eastern hemisphere due to a lack of democratic social and political structures and aspirations (*Jasmine and Stars* 92). In fact, as Keshavarz makes clear, Parsipur's novel remains popular in Iran; it has been translated into English twice<sup>14</sup> – along with some of Parsipur's other major works – and into other languages as well. Finally, through her meticulous critique of Parsipur's novel, Keshavarz strikes a balance between her previous discussions of classical Persian literary giants, which, without any contemporary counterpart, may only confirm the mentioned Orientalist assumption.

*Women Without Men* is the story of self-discovery, resilience, and imagination revolving around several suffering women. Even though the women may be initially considered as beset by conservative and traditionalist social patriarchy, they are by no means identical to Nafisi's hapless victims. Rather, they eventually break out of the social boundaries that constrain them, and forge a new space for themselves – a woman's hub, as it were – in a garden in the city of Karaj near Tehran and are all redeemed from their plights at the end in one way or another.

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<sup>14</sup> The first translation appeared in 1998 by Kamran Talattof and Jocelyn Sharlet (and in 2004 with an Afterword by Persis M. Karim), published by Syracuse University Press. The second translation was published in 2011 by Faridoun Farrokh with a Preface by Shirin Neshat.

Beside the narrative content that asserts the power of imagination and engages with a wide variety of feminist issues, the novella is significant for the timing of its production and publication. As Keshavarz has pointed out, “this colorful tale of self discovery was written during the same time period highlighted in *RLT* [that is, the first decade after the 1979 Revolution]” (105).

Reflecting on the concept of imagination, Nafisi thus writes in *RLT* that

I have a recurring fantasy that one more article has been added to the Bill of Rights: the right to free access to imagination. I have come to believe that genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine and the right to use imaginative works without any restrictions. (338)

Challenging Nafisi’s claims of “lack of imagination”, Keshavarz describes Parsipur’s fiction as “brightly imaginative” and argues that

She has *personally* given herself the “right to free access to imagination,” the article that Nafisi wants to add to the Bill of Rights in her “recurring fantasy” in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (*RLT*, 338). No, Parsipur’s imagination is not a fantasy. It is real. And it is a phenomenon in contemporary Persian fiction. (85)

Keshavarz’s choice of Parsipur’s work as an eminent Iranian woman writer is an informed one. It is particularly so since some of Parsipur’s major works are colored by a strong element of magic realism which qualifies the author as a pioneer of the genre in Iranian contemporary literary landscape. In *Women Without Men*, for instance, Munis, one of the main protagonists dies twice and is resurrected each time to continue her journey of self-discovery. Another character, Mahdukht, plants herself in the garden as a tree and gives birth to flowers. The touch of magic realism in *Women Without Men*, as well as some of Parsipur’s other works, further debunks Nafisi’s claims of lack of imagination in both the Iran of the time and in its literary tradition. Notwithstanding, it is worth mentioning that the work Keshavarz focuses on for the

purposes of her counter narrative, shares some of the characteristics of neo-Orientalist narratives on Iran.

For instance, even though in its totality *Women Without Men* is a far cry from Nafisi's *RLT*, Parsipur's treatment of Iranian manhood is at times similar to those of *RLT*. For instance, one of the major male characters is Amir, a seemingly devout Muslim young man, who is characterized by dishonesty, cowardice, and opportunism. He kills his sister for being on the streets by herself for a month, and desires to marry a neighbor's "pretty, soft, quiet, shy, kind, reserved" daughter (*Jasmine and Stars* 89). A second male character, Mr. Gulchehreh is portrayed as an insensitive, petty man with a "bad temper and antisocial behavior" (*Jasmine and Stars* 98) who despite his intense love for his wife is terrified of expressing it to her, fearing that she might never take him seriously or might even leave him. Not only does he try to conceal his true emotions for his wife, he teases and ridicules her for how she dresses, her appearance, and the fact that she is approaching menopause.

The next men one encounters in the narrative are a truck driver and his assistant who rape Munis and Faizeh – two of the female protagonists – in "a cold-blooded encounter", as Keshavarz has observed, "made all the more horrible by the fact that the rapists treat it like a stop to get a cup of tea or smoke a cigarette" (*Jasmine and Stars* 96). Therefore, in a vein similar to the dominant neo-Orientalist discourse of Muslim male chauvinism, *Women Without Men* seems to portray a society suffocated by oppressive patriarchy. Nevertheless, Parsipur departs from a total black-and-white characterization of Iranian manhood through the figure of the only truly "harmless" man in the story, "the good gardener", a "sweet and nurturing" man who "serves and entertains the women but is not a threat" (*Jasmine and Stars* 88). Also, unlike the male characters in *RLT*, the personal vices of Parsipur's characters are attributed to the capacity of human beings for wickedness and malevolence rather than simply to their religious beliefs. Furthermore, contrary to its neo-Orientalist counterparts, the women protagonists in *Women Without Men* eventually do not seem to remain eternally "victimized" and manage to break out of their strict social confines. Similarly, they do not seek redemption and "liberation"

beyond the borders of their country, but rather within themselves, and manage to survive their plights through their inner resilience, creativity, and empathy for fellow-sufferers.

Keshavarz has responded to the criticism about representations of men in *Women Without Men*, arguing that Parsipur's work is "fiction" and, therefore, she is not "chronicling historical incident" (90). Furthermore, she argues, Parsipur's novel is about "human frailty and flaw" and it does not promote a binary and Orientalist perception of the world. Also, she has pointed out that the novel is written shortly after the 1979 Revolution, which many predicted would promote patriarchal habits. As such, Parsipur's novel fictionalizes "potential agents or targets of patriarchy" (90).

As convincing as Keshavarz's explanation of what may be seen as the vilification of men in *Women without Men* may sound, one could still observe a similar pattern running through some of Parsipur's other works. Her other major novel, *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1987), a quasi-philosophical epic novel of magic realism that explores the changing fortunes of Iranian women is also tinged by an Orientalist flavor that invests in some clichéd representations of both Iranian manhood and womanhood.

In a vein quite similar to the narrative in *Women Without Men*, *Touba and the Meaning of Night* is replete with episodes including rape and murder of women by men. Setareh, one of the protagonists, is first raped by Cossack soldiers and then murdered and her body mutilated by her uncle in an act of honor killing. Significantly, the novel was first published in English in 2006 (during the upsurge in the wave of post-9/11 Iranian-American memoirs) by The Feminist Press in the United States and Azar Nafisi's blurb thus commends the book and its author: "Like Parsipur herself, her protagonists are women whose rebellions are not merely political but existential, against a system that denies them their individual dignity and stunts their potentials for growth" ("The Feminist Press"). Ironically, as Keshavarz has argued in *J&S*, Nafisi does all but acknowledge the existence of such imaginative and feministic works in contemporary Persian literary tradition in *RLT* and instead overemphasizes the "liberating" and "empowering" quality of their Western counterparts to Iranian women.



Even though none of Parsipur's works are as nearly deeply entrenched in the discourse of neo-Orientalism as *RLT* and its likes, since their publications in English, they seem to have been co-opted by the dominant Western feminist discourse as testaments to the oppression of women in Iran. This is evident in some of the reviews on the English translation of *Women Without Men* – also published by The Feminist Press in 2004 – that are almost identical to those of neo-Orientalist narratives. Kirkus Review, for instance, wrote that

The oppression of women in Iran's male-dominated culture and the power inherent in female solidarity are the themes of Parsipur's ingenious "novel," which is composed of thirteen related stories depicting five abused women whose assertions of their independence take vivid symbolic forms. A girl terrified of sex, for example, becomes a tree in order to retain her virginity; a docile woman killed by her dictatorial brother is reborn, only to be victimized again by a man. ("Women without Men (Review)")

One final point that remains untold in Keshavarz's encomium on Parsipur is noteworthy. Even though Parsipur has contributed to Iran's contemporary literary tradition – especially that of the women writers – and has produced works of great literary merit, novelty, and significance, the restrictions surrounding the publication of her works and her treatment of controversial 'taboo' subjects in Iran of the 90s led her to choose self-exile and to seek refuge in the U.S. where she now resides (Bashi). Nevertheless, none of the criticism offered above confutes Parsipur's impress on modern Persian fiction, especially those by female authors, nor do they undermine the fact that her oeuvre is a testament to the power of imagination and the resilience of the female protagonists that not only survive but eventually become masters of their own destinies.

### **The Good, the Missing, and the Faceless: Unmasking *Lolita* in the West**

The fourth chapter of *J&S* "The Good, the Missing, and the Faceless: What Is Wrong with *Reading Lolita in Tehran*" initiates an extensive discussion of *RLT* and what the author sees as its major flaws. Keshavarz reveals *RLT*'s factual inaccuracies, its misrepresentation of things Iranian and Islamic, as well as the total elimination of the native poetic and literary tradition

which Rahimieh deems as “more than equal to the masterpieces of English literature Nafisi posits as the sole source of nourishment for her students in Iran” (535).

One of Keshavarz’s major problems with *RLT* seems to be its characterization or what she calls “typological problems” (113). According to Keshavarz, *RLT*’s world is one dominated by “the ugly”, “the faceless” and the peculiar absence of the “missing”. That is the major reason that throughout her own narrative, Keshavarz tries to offer a different characterization of Iranian men and women who stand in sharp contrast to the evil characters that permeate Nafisi’s world.

De Paul has argued that while Keshavarz’s dissection of *RLT* as “part of an emerging ‘New Orientalist’ school of writing is intriguing and could have been expanded”, she “focuses a little too obsessively on *Reading Lolita*, and this preoccupation becomes grating, a burden on the writing” (“Reviews” 186). Along the same lines, Elisheva Machlis has remarked that

Keshavarz's critique is meticulous, and systematically demonstrates how Nafisi's book represents this new Orientalist approach. Nevertheless, this focus on a single publication somewhat undermines Keshavarz's attempt to deliver a broader message both on Orientalism and on the cultural significance of the Persian literary culture. (104)

While the above critics’ observations are fairly valid, one could argue that the “preoccupation” is warranted given that the phrase “Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran”, as well as the author’s expression of intent at the beginning of her book makes it clear from the outset that the whole book is intended as a counterhegemonic response to *RLT*. Keshavarz engages with *RLT* precisely because of its unprecedented popularity, and in doing so, she sets out to address the same audience of readers. This is quite significant for Keshavarz since she is writing back to a kind of Orientalist ‘literacy’ established by Nafisi. In other words, the influence of *RLT* in the U.S. market and on the Western readership has been so immense that it established both the ‘standard’ genre and leitmotifs within which subsequent Iranian-American ‘memoir’ writers had to formulate their works, as evidenced by the considerable number of Iranian-American memoirs that fairly closely matched Nafisi’s underlying assumptions and representations. Be

that as it may, one could concur with Dahmen that “As Nafisi's own work is sometimes hampered by the weight of unfamiliar references for non-expert readers, Keshavarz's writing becomes disjointed by interjected comments about *RLT*” (203).

Even though Keshavarz's two stated goals in writing *J&S* are to offer her “jasmine and stars” and to point out the intellectual dangers of distorted and partial vision promoted by *RLT* and its likes, her critique of the “New Orientalist” discourse is not confined to *RLT* or similar works. In fact, Keshavarz does voice her criticism of an essentially Orientalist perception of the Western-constructed Other, and the ignorance and hatred that it has bred in the West apropos Muslim cultures through the medium of her other personal narratives and encounters in the West. Through such instances, she sets out to critique clichéd representations of Muslim cultures and counter Nafisi's descriptions of Iranians as driven by fanaticism and ignorance and sexually obsessed. Also, through her personal narratives she invites her Western readers to rethink their perceptions and receptions of such representations, just as she invites them to view Iran through the alternative lens provided by her work.

To elucidate the dangers of the ignorance and the fear promoted by the neo-Orientalist discourse, early in her first chapter, Keshavarz recounts an incident involving her and an ordinary American woman in a local grocery store:

She was more or less my age, very likely heading home from work, and had similar things in her shopping basket. Our eyes met for a second and we laughed. There was no need to say anything. We almost knew each other's thoughts: “You are tired, too ... and glad to be heading home!” (16)

Nevertheless, at the mere mention of Keshavarz's Muslim-sounding married name (Karamustafa), the woman's smile gives way to “a mix of discomfort and suspicion” (16). Keshavarz recounts the story to illuminate how what she terms the “master narrative”, the voice in the background, which dictates how the average Westerner should perceive their Oriental/Muslim Other. It can also serve as a counterpoint to Nafisi's depictions of “fanatic” (Muslim) Iranians who beheld things Western with a mixture of suspicion and loathing.

In another instance, Keshavarz offers an account of how she and her husband discontinued their decade-old subscription to a major national newspaper for the way it persistently portrayed the situation in the war-torn Iraq. She thus describes how they were

tired of finding destitute Iraqi peddler women wrapped in black chadors staring from the front page with angry eyes, clearly not pleased with the presence of the photographer. Or, on other days, it might be a toothless, turbaned old man contemplating a bottle of water as if it had dropped from heaven, or a bare Iraqi body laid on the table to be prepared for the “mysterious” Muslim burial ritual. In today’s Iraq, one might ask, are there no young children to be found in a school yard, sitting on a bench chatting and laughing? Are there no young Iraqi men and women looking normal and walking in a park somewhere? (51)

By questioning representations of Iraq in the Western press and her rhetorical question about alternative subjects of representation, Keshavarz both criticizes the deeply entrenched images of the Muslim world, and draws attention to the role the West, and particularly the United States, has played in wreaking havoc through an all-destructive war against Iraq.

In another seemingly disjointed, but quite interrelated episode, Keshavarz registers her American friends’ shock at a program on NPR about “how in rich parts of the country, Iranian women buy very expensive underwear” (53). The message, according to Keshavarz, is clear: “Look at these hypocritical pious Muslims covering themselves in public. In reality, they are nothing but sex objects to their husbands. They buy the stuff to please men” (53). In this episode, Keshavarz censures Western sensationalization and exoticization of Muslim women’s sexuality, by corroborating her friend’s observation that “we sometimes try to make the enemy sound like ourselves. It is our way of coming to terms with differences” (53). Also, she is drawing her Western readers’ attention to the sexualization of women’s bodies and what in this case is a fetishization of their wardrobe in the West. Also, her friend’s observation is a testament to the Orientalist strategy of the Western projection of certain unpleasant attributes – here sexualization of women’s bodies – to a faraway Orient. Furthermore, through the

citation of this particular instance and especially her friend's observation, Keshavarz is counterpoising Nafisi's assertions in *RLT* about Iranian's 'obsession' with sexuality, exemplified in her assertion, among many others, that "our culture shunned sex because it was too involved with it" (304), a claim that, as previously shown in the discussion of *RLT*, reveals more about Nafisi's obsession with sexuality than the Iranians she describes.

### **Tea with My Father and the Saints: Humanizing the Persian Patriarch**

In the final chapter of *J&S*, "Tea with My Father and the Saints", Keshavarz once again turns to narratives of her personal life and devotes most of the chapter to descriptions of her personal and intellectual encounters with her father. It may initially seem that Keshavarz's arrangement of the chapters of *J&S* in her presentation of the female and male "stars" creates a kind of narrative disjointedness for the purposes of her memoir. Nevertheless, this discontinuity between the respective discussions of the female and male figures seems intentional and well-devised. In fact, in doing so Keshavarz is treating each figure as distinct from the other – despite their obvious similarities – and draws more attention to what makes each unique in its own way. While Farrokhzad and Parsipur are both meant to exemplify Iranian women's social and political agency and dynamism, they each have a unique literary significance that might have been overshadowed had Keshavarz chosen to discuss them in a single chapter. Similarly, while Keshavarz's uncle and father both share certain human attributes, in devoting a chapter to each she has managed to flesh out each character and thus posit each as a counterexample to Nafisi's male characters.

More than any other chapter in *J&S*, Keshavarz's final chapter serves to humanize ordinary Iranians and Muslims. If Keshavarz represents Farrokhzad and Parsipur as phenomenal writers and iconoclasts, and her uncle as the epitome of "decent Iranian manhood" (66), she does not reserve such complements for her father and, in fact, makes it clear from the outset that her father was anything but extraordinary. This is how Keshavarz opens the final chapter of *J&S*:

I can easily compare my uncle the painter to a saint. In fact, I have a hard time imagining a saint in any other way. My father, by contrast, was not a saint by any stretch of the imagination. He was emotional, demanding, and easily offended. Our relationship, which grew closer in the latter years of his life, always remained stormy. (145)

This depiction of her father in all his ordinariness, in effect, invalidates the criticism that “no one in Keshavarz’s family seems to have any flaws or shortcomings” (Mannani 324).

In painting a real-life portrait of her father, Keshavarz challenges the Orientalist penchant for zooming in on the dark side of characters and representing them in stereotypical black-and-white clichés. Her personal differences and disagreements with her father notwithstanding, Keshavarz makes a point of how her father was exceptionally “generous” and how poetry and literature served as an intellectual medium through which they bonded with one another (145). Refuting Nafisi’s claims about lack of literary interest among Iranians, Keshavarz declares that she “never encountered another person with such sensitivity to poetry” as her father (146).

### **Reading Beyond Jasmine and Stars**

Due to its comparatively much less controversial narrative content, unlike *RLT*, Keshavarz’s memoir has neither been put on a pedestal nor come under considerable criticism. The only exception, however, has been Manijeh Mannani’s trenchant critique of *J&S*, in which she claims, among other things, that “‘the true self’ is disguised by the subject more in Keshavarz’s memoir than by Nafisi in *RLT*” and that “Keshavarz’s response to Nafisi is far from objective and realistic” (322). Mannani also accuses Keshavarz of having made the “boastful and naive claim to have written *J&S* with the aid of an unfailing memory” which “only undermines the sincerity and authenticity of her response to *RLT*” (322). Mannani’s strident points of contention with Keshavarz fall little short of an ad hominem attack on both Keshavarz and her work and are at best largely misplaced and misconceived.

To begin with, Keshavarz does not even imply any possession of an “unfailing memory” let alone “boast” of it and Mannani fails to provide any quotes or references to back up her assertion. The question of authenticity, especially as regards works of memory, is a common and indeed highly controversial one. In her review of *J&S*, Amy DePaul has asked the apt question of “How are one person's reminiscences to be judged more definitive than another's?” (“Reviews” 185). As far as Nafisi’s representations in *RLT* are concerned, it was previously shown how many of her assertions proved to be either historically unsound or too exaggerated, the authenticity of which were further undermined by her dubious political affiliations which at times made her work border on a neoconservative propaganda. Keshavarz, on the other hand, makes far less assertions in her work and her reminiscences are more of a personal and intimate nature, even when she discusses prominent contemporary figures in Persian literature. Regardless of the nature of the assertions Nafisi and Keshavarz make in their works, accusing Keshavarz of claiming an “infallible memory” (322) is simply inaccurate.

Equally unfounded is Mannani’s criticism that in *J&S* “On the one hand, there is the beautification of Iranian culture, and on the other, the demonization of anyone who criticizes it” (322). Once again, Mannani’s contentions remain at the level of unsubstantiated generality and misplaced allegation. One could argue that Keshavarz’s focus on her more pleasant reminiscences as well as the more appealing facets of the Iranian society and culture is anything but unjustified. In her introduction, Keshavarz clearly states her belief that Western, and especially American, readers “deserve to partake of the peaceful and enriching gifts that Iran has to offer” (7) and expressly asserts the reason behind the writing of her work:

Too many good things fall through the cracks in many books written about the country of my birth and the people who nurtured me. So I have decided to write one that focuses on the good things, one that gives voice to what has previously been silenced and overlooked. (*Jasmine and Stars* 15-16)

Keshavarz further justifies her approach to representing her native culture in an interview, remarking that “I do not add more villains to the picture for the simple reason that there is an

abundance of them in view already" ("Jasmine and Stars: An Interview"). Even so, Mannani has taken the above quotation not as a clear expression of authorial intention to shed light on what she deems is overlooked or silenced about her home country – which sounds justified in light of the prevalent demonization of the country and its people – but rather as evidence that Keshavarz “ignorantly or even naively, admits her highly selective approach” (325). It is apt to mention here that like any other text that is a “memoir”, the authors are always bound to make choices – either consciously or otherwise – about what they set out to represent. Furthermore, one could observe in *J&S* that Keshavarz’s “positive” views of her native country and Islam are still tempered and humanized (as, for example, seeing the faults in the character of her father) to minimize the risk of idealization and “beautification”.

Even though Keshavarz's narrative is profoundly personal, it opens up new vistas to the culture, religion, and specifically literature of the country of her origin and even the country of her residence (the U.S.). It also serves as a significant reminder of how crucial it is to read various and contrasting narratives when trying to understand a place, particularly one as controversially differently portrayed as Iran (DePaul "Reviews" 186). Thus, addressing her readers directly, Keshavarz benefits from her own gift of poetic voice and perhaps reflecting Nafisi's narrative strategy, weaves intimately personal reminiscences into her discourse. She does this both to offer her gifts of jasmine and stars to her Western readers and to “legitimize her case against Nafisi” (Machlis 104). While both Nafisi and Keshavarz believe in what Nasrin Rahimieh has termed “the salutary function of the life of letters”, contrary to Nafisi, Keshavarz adamantly illustrates that years of revolution and war have all but banished her Iranian compatriots from the realm of the letters (535).

Keshavarz's strategy in presenting her “stars” is consistently effective. Through weaving her narrative with those of the figures she presents, she grafts the voices of her “stars”, especially the women authors she introduces, onto her own and thus not only advances her criticism of a “New Orientalist” discourse, but also provides a space for those figures to be seen and make their impact on the intended Western audience. In other words, contrary to Nafisi's memoir which serves to silence the aspirations and achievements – literary or otherwise – of



Iranian women through a persistent negation strategy, *J&S* serves as an environment in which the literary, social, and political dynamism of Iranian women thrives through Keshavarz's counter-affirmation approach. The fact that the English translations of both Farrokhzad and Parsipur are finding a broader readership in the U.S. today is a testament to both the necessity and the effect of the space that such accounts as Keshavarz's provide.

Throughout her narrative Keshavarz manages to decouple the Orient (in this case both Iran and Islam) from the tragedy and crisis perpetually imputed to it in the West by offering her many "jasmine and stars" and at times by counterpoising a similar human tragedy and crisis in the Western hemisphere. In her presentation of Farrokhzad and Parsipur, she effectively decouples Iranian women from oppression, docility, victimization, and the need for Western liberation. In the humaneness of her uncle and human ordinariness of her father, she manages to decouple Iranian men from male-chauvinism, fanaticism, and violence attributed to them by "the master narrative" exemplified by *RLT*. Similarly, by focusing on such Persian literary giants as Attar and Rumi, among others, and their openhearted and all-embracing religious philosophies, she decouples Islam from the violence and intolerance by which it has come to be known in the West. That is why *J&S* ultimately transcends a critique of *RLT* by presenting "its own rich and complex account of lives blended with religion and culture" (Tourage 103). Furthermore, apart from the literary giants Keshavarz discusses, she introduces to her readers such world-renowned towering contemporary Iranian figures as Simin Behbahani (literature), Mohammad Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (literature), Abdulkarim Soroush (philosophy), Shirin Ebadi (law- Nobel Laureate), Abbas Kiarostami (cinema), Tahmineh Milani (cinema), Rakhshan Bani Itemad (cinema), and Mohsen Makhmalbaf (cinema) – figures who are a testament to the vibrancy and dynamism of the Iranian cultural landscape and remain almost conspicuously absent from neo-Orientalist narratives on Iran (124-26).

It is apt to conclude Keshavarz's resistant narrative by returning to Said's discussion of resisting hegemony. In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that

Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance, and in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.  
(xii)

*Jasmine and Stars* has certainly not been as popular and enthusiastically received as *RLT*, since, among other things, it does not cater to the expectations of a mass market used to Orientalist tales from the Middle East. Also, *J&S* lacks the timing and promotion factors that significantly kept *RLT* on top of the bestseller list in the U.S. Be that as it may, even if Keshavarz's narrative has been successful in its "invitation to see beyond fear" – which the reviews by both literary critics and readers indicate it has – and has managed to bridge the chasm that threatens to further divide Iranians and Americans, no matter how small that bridge may be, one could claim, echoing Said, that her resistant discourse has finally "won out".

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Towards an Ambivalent Future

Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can't ride you unless your back is bent. (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

The current study aimed to offer a critical analysis of the three paradigmatic texts in representations of Iran and Islam both prior to and in the aftermath of the definitive events of 9/11. Throughout the chapters, I demonstrated how these narratives were conditioned by the specificity of such historical junctures as the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, elements that distinguish these narratives from other hyphenated American memoirs in the United States and partially account for their 'Iranianness'. Investigating representations of Iran, especially Iranian womanhood, in the first two texts revealed how such representations operate within the framework of an Orientalist episteme about Iran, and how they can be co-opted to promote (conservative) political agendas vis-à-vis Muslim countries.

The critical perusal of Betty Mahmoody's bestselling *Not Without My Daughter* as the quintessential Orientalist text in pre-9/11 representations of Iran revealed the manner in which the text appropriates the deeply-entrenched tradition of American captivity narratives to narrate the "true" story of a white American women entrapped in the land of the 'savages', where "life was primitive under the best of conditions" (379). Mahmoody's eventual purported "escape" from Iran renders her saga as a captivity narrative of trauma, escape, and return to the 'civilized world': this final phase of the narrative is melodramatically encapsulated in Mahtob's elation at seeing the stars and stripes: "'Mummy, look. Look!' She pointed to the American flag, waving freely in the wind" (416). Mahmoody's escape and return underpin the Orientalist feminist binary of the free Western woman vis-à-vis her victimized Muslim counterparts who are apparently destined to remain haplessly, and endlessly, oppressed, if not liberated by their 'free' Western sisters. While Mahmoody returns to the sanctuary of the 'free world' – through the benefaction of her Westophile Iranian friends – the many 'oppressed'

Iranian women seem to remain “captive” within a three-tier oppressive structure: “imprisoned” within the geographical boundaries of their country, ensnared in a social structure predicated upon male chauvinism, and on a much deeper level, captives of an “authoritarian” religion which has subdued them beyond redemption.

The striking thematic consanguinity between Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Mahmoody’s memoir is perhaps the best testament to one of the principal denominators of (neo)Orientalist narratives, that is their internal consistency. As Said maintains in his *Orientalism*,

The phenomenon of Orientalism ... deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient ... despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a “real” Orient. (5)

Hence, Nafisi’s memoir was shown to recycle the underlying topoi in Mahmoody’s work while presenting them through a women’s book club of sorts and the seemingly sophisticated modus operandi of English literature. The conspicuous kinship between representations of Iran/Islam by Nafisi and Mahmoody – the formers’ work the product of post-9/11 era and the latter’s post-Islamic Revolution – attest not only to the protean and multifarious nature of Orientalism, but to its pride of place in a Western discourse of Otherness.

In a similar fashion, like Mahmoody, whose escape to the ‘civilized world’ marked her redemption, Nafisi, and by extension her “girls”, seems to be ‘liberated’ only after she becomes the denizen of the United States and can narrate her story for the Western world. Nafisi’s idea of the liberation of Iranian women, as demonstrated in Chapter Three, is well-aligned with those of the neoconservative clique in the U.S. – a lucrative affiliation which both made possible the publication of *RLT* and was conducive to the vigorous promotion of the memoir and its author in the United States. Significantly, despite its deep investment in personal revelation (for an Iranian-American memoir, at least) and the author’s international fame as the author of *RLT*, Nafisi’s next book, *Things I’ve Been Silent About* (2008), which recounts the story

of Nafisi's mother and the her troubled relationship with her, has not been as nearly successful or well-received in the West as *RLT*.<sup>15</sup> Not only does this further testify to the power of Orientalist discourse and the reader's expectations of a 'good', 'oriental' tale, but also proves the significance of the timing of production and the political zeitgeist of the time that catapulted both Mahmoody's and Nafisi's memoirs onto the bestseller list. Writing in the established mainstream discourse not only about, but *against* Iran has brought both Mahmoody and Nafisi enormous fortune and publicity.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the statement made by Nafisi's magician that "So many people have made their name through their opposition to the regime" (*Reading Lolita* 181) could not be more ironic. Nafisi's horror stories about the "Islamic Republic" keep resurfacing in her later works, despite their seeming contextual detachments from the politics of postrevolutionary Iran. Nafisi's latest work, *The Republic of Imagination: America in Three Books* (2014), an account, apparently, of the author's reflection "on her lifelong love for Western literature through an exhilarating exploration of three American classics" (as the praise on the Oprah Magazine has it), opens with yet another account of the arrest of one of Nafisi's fans, his imprisonment, and flogging in postrevolutionary Iran. The reference concludes: "There was no denying that a normal day in the life of a young Iranian is very different from that of most young Americans" (1). Nafisi's (and Mahmoody's) memoir, as well as many kindred Iranian-American memoirs, tallies well with Marandi and Pirnajmuddin's observation that "In the market for such 'memoirs,' the tellers of these modern 'oriental tales' or 'memories' feel sure that anything sells – and the more sensational the stuff, the better it sells and the more 'popular' it gets" (41). In her *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America*, Tara Bahrapour, the author of one of the very few pre-9/11 Iranian-American memoirs describes how her mother, who had written a fictional narrative about a woman whose innocent husband is executed in Revolutionary Iran, was approached by an American

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<sup>15</sup> If citations of a work are any indication, Google Scholar shows that of *RLT* as 517 and *Things I have Been Silent About* standing as 17.

<sup>16</sup> Until 1992, Mahmoody's memoir had sold some 12 million copies and was translated into more than 20 languages. Sales figures for *RLT* are not exactly known but figures published in 2007 suggest that since its publication in 2003 *RLT* has sold more than 1.5 million copies (Howell). Also, the irony that despite her deep resentment for her ex-husband, Betty Mahmoody has to date maintained her Iranian surname even after her husband's divorce and death, should not be lost in the consideration of her fame.

publisher who wanted “to know if Mama will go on TV and say it’s true” (143). Nafisi’s ‘true’ account is further underpinned by her arrogation to academic excellence: “I am too much of an academic: I have written too many papers and articles to turn my experiences and ideas into narratives without pontificating” (*Reading Lolita* 266).<sup>17</sup>

Fatemeh Keshavarz’s pioneering *Jasmine and Stars* manages to fulfill the promises it makes in its Introduction: it offers the Western readers much food for thought and an alternative vantage point through which they are invited to reconsider the dominant Orientalist perceptions about Others of all ilks. By adopting the structural and thematic denominators of Iranian-American narratives, Keshavarz embarks on her counter-narrative which, far beyond a critique of Nafisi’s memoir, writes back to the dominant Western grand narratives on the Oriental Other both by laying bare their underlying flaws and by crafting a space wherein her ‘resistant’ voice – along with those of the “stars” she introduces – begins to emerge. Unlike Nafisi’s women, the women in Keshavarz’s narrative seek no benevolent outside liberator, be it literary or military, and being quite cognizant of their social, political, and religious rootedness, strive to break free from restrictive societal confines.

Even though changing the dominant perceptions about any nation is a Herculean task, if not impossible, Keshavarz seems to have achieved some new measure of critical awareness by drawing attention to the complexities and nuances of cultures. In an interview about her book and its reception in the United States, Keshavarz remarked that

Readers – exposed only to negative news on Iran – are amazed at how imaginative, vibrant, and articulate contemporary Iranians can be ... This is most shocking in the case of women writers and artists. For example, I have a chapter dedicated to the writer Sharhnush Parsipour and the novel she wrote after the 1979 revolution, *Women Without Men*... I receive daily e-mails from people who want to read more of Parsipour's writing. ("Jasmine and Stars: An Interview")

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<sup>17</sup> Nafisi’s claim notwithstanding, Professor Hamid Dabashi argues that Nafisi lacks the credit of “a single credible book or scholarly credential to her name other than *Reading Lolita in Tehran*” (Dabashi “Native Informers”) and that it has been her “career opportunism” that has “led her to [the] corridors of power” (Dabashi and Khosmood).

Keshavarz redoubles her efforts in presenting a more realistic picture of Iran by maintaining a blog, *Windows on Iran: Explorations of Persian Culture and Politics*<sup>18</sup> in which she offers nuanced cultural and political commentary on mostly contemporary Iranian affairs, à la *Jasmine and Stars*.

The Conclusion of this study met serendipitously with the landmark accord between Iran and the six “world powers” over Iran’s nuclear program. In the aftermath of the deal, images of Iran as a land ripe for Western commercial investments have begun to emerge mostly in the discourse of Western politicians, reminding one of Said’s *locus classicus*, “the East as career” (*Orientalism* 5), borrowed from Benjamin Disraeli’s *Tancred*. Also, images of often chic young Iranian women – à la *Jasmine and Star*’s cover photo – celebrating the historic deal are becoming more prevalent in the popular media, which further corroborates the active agency of Iranian women (and men) and the vigorous sociopolitical landscape of the country (and perhaps the Western obsession with ‘exotic’ Oriental women, too).

Whether this recent political rapprochement would herald a change both in the relationship between Iran and the United States, as well as the broader representations of Iran, could only be a matter of wild speculation and wishful thinking for the present. If the deal and its myriad implications for both countries do influence the dominant perceptions of Iran, it would be a worthwhile suggestion for further research on representations of Iran. So is also the exploration of the few memoirs produced in the aftermath of the controversial 2009 presidential elections in Iran,<sup>19</sup> to gauge any possible significant generic or thematic distinction or diversion from other post-9/11 Iranian-American memoirs. It would also be worthwhile to juxtapose memoirs written by Iranian men with the ones written by Iranian women to see if gender politics results in a different representation.

Insofar as the dominant representations of Iran and Islam, as critiqued in this study, are concerned, besides being a woeful testament to the hegemony and legacy of Orientalism and

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<sup>18</sup> Available at: <https://windowsoniran.wordpress.com/>

<sup>19</sup> Among such accounts are Afsaneh Moqadam’s *Death to the Dictator!: A Young Man Casts a Vote in Iran’s 2009 Election and Pays a Devastating Price* (2010), and Saideh Pakravan’s *Azadi: Protests in the Streets of Tehran* (2011).

its progeny, one cannot concur more with Said's lament in his *Culture and Imperialism* that the power and predominance of such representations bears witness to the fact that "In short, we face as a nation the deep, profoundly perturbed and perturbing question of our relationship to others — other cultures, states, histories, experiences, traditions, peoples, and destinies" (55).



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